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Praise songs & toxic discourse: alternative readings of literature and the environment

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Praise songs & toxic discourse: alternative readings of literature and the environment

by

Diana L. Boeckmann

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Program of Study Committee:
Jane Davis, Co-major Professor
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Graduate College
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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Diana L. Boeckmann

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

For the Major Program

Praise songs & toxic discourse: alternative readings of literature and the environment

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I.

Green Mountain Girl:

My Introduction to Literature and the Environment

My life began in the Appalachian Highlands, on the eastern edge of the Green Mountain National Forest, in the White River Valley of central Vermont, where I was born into a family of readers and writers living close to the land. Literature and the environment have been intertwined in my consciousness ever since. As a child, the first story I committed to memory (thereby paving the way to reading) was *Home for a Bunny*, written by Margaret Wise Brown, and illustrated by Garth Williams. This book, given to me by my mother when I was four years old in 1961, is, astonishingly, still in my possession more than forty years later. A Little Golden Book with worn cardboard covers and brittle pages held together with ancient, yellowing cellophane tape, its price, marked in red in the upper right-hand corner, is twenty-five cents. On the front is an illustration of a brown-and-white rabbit posed in anthropomorphic bewilderment in a field of flowers. Inside, on the title page, the same bunny crouches beside a clump of star-shaped blue flowers. If you look closely at the roots of the blooms where they are springing from a cushion of green grass, you can see the neat printing of my twenty-three-year-old mother, Barbara: "Bluets."

My copy of *Home for a Bunny* is altered on almost every page with my mother's handwriting, identifying many of the wildflowers in Garth Williams's lovely illustrations: dogtooth violet, swamp buttercup, skunk cabbage, herb Robert, wood anemone. My favorite flower is near the end, where the brown-and-white rabbit is standing with his new friend, white rabbit, surrounded by a profusion of blooms. Near the bottom of the page is the

mysterious, pink, curvaceous “Lady’s Slipper,” a type of swamp orchid, almost hidden from view, partially obliterated by little fingers that stroked the picture on this page over and over.

The connection between literature and environment was reified for me when my mother took me into the back woods of the Green Mountains to find the rare Lady’s Slipper, elusive and protected by law in Vermont. After many days and hours of tramping through the woods looking for the flower, finally, early one morning in a wet glen near a running brook, we found a patch of the dainty orchids; yellow, not pink, spangled with dew, nodding and swaying above the soft green moss on the cool forest floor, dangling from their slender stalks like so many elfin boots hung up to dry. Kneeling there, I worshipped the flowers. My mother let me stay as long as I liked, but she would not let me touch them. Back home, I touched the picture of the Lady’s Slipper in *Home for a Bunny* instead.

Later, I would come to understand that my mother was transmitting to me my cultural heritage: the Smead clan, of which I was the newest member in 1957, had long been embedded in the Green Mountains of Vermont, cloistered in the deep forest, immersed in nature and books. High in the foothills above Rochester village, in a little mountain community called North Hollow, lay the Smead family farm, a smallholding populated in my earliest memories by my paternal great-grandmother, Margaret Stetson Smead, my grandparents, George and Ellen Smead, and my mother, Barbara, who came home in 1959 from a brief, bad marriage in the South, aged twenty-one, with my brother and me. Barbara’s seven younger brothers and sisters completed the family on the Smead farm. (One of my aunts, Alison, died in a car accident the year I was born.)

Thirteen of us lived in two dwellings: Great-Grandma Smead in solitary splendor in

the “big house,” and the other twelve adults and children in the renovated mineworker’s shack that, years before, my grandfather had dragged up to the farm from the antique-verde marble quarry a half-mile away, on skids behind the great-hearted Percheron, Blackie. My grandfather had added some small rooms to the original cabin as more and more children came along, but the little house was still very cramped.

Much of the space not occupied by children was stacked with books. In the mountains, there was no television, no radio, and no movie theater. For entertainment, adults and children alike had two primary pastimes: roaming the woods, and reading books. We were dirt-poor, as were many native Vermonters in that era. Yet we felt rich, because we had all outdoors, and more books than we could ever read, piled in every corner of my grandparents’ little house. Books were regarded as a necessary expense, like food, or shoes.

My grandfather, George Horace Smead, a dreamer like Henry David Thoreau, honestly believed it was worthwhile to attempt living off the land, so on the hardscrabble farm of some eighty acres, he reared nine children amongst cows, chickens, goats, pigs, and horses, as well as extensive vegetable gardens managed by my grandmother and the six girls. In summer, the women went “berrying,” bringing home buckets of raspberries, blackberries, and blueberries from the mountain meadows. In autumn, they were “canning,” put summer’s vegetables into sealed glass jars for the winter. In winter, the three boys joined Grandpa Smead in “sugaring,” making syrup from the sap of Vermont’s abundant maple trees. Producing food from the land to feed the Smead family was a year-round occupation.

Similarly, Grandpa Smead believed in education and self-education. Though he had a degree in philosophy from the University of Vermont, he worked for many years as a laborer,

and then a foreman, at the Weyerhaeuser lumber mill in the White River valley. But the job did not wholly occupy Grandpa's mind. At home in the mountains, he read constantly, lecturing us children about the importance of books, exhorting us to read as much as he did (an impossible dream). One by one, my young aunts and uncles went off to college, and eventually, so did my mother. So did I. So did one of my brothers.

Just as we were expected to cultivate the land for nourishment, we were also taught to cultivate our minds through literature. And just as we were allowed to roam the woods and fields freely, nothing was off-limits to us children where books were concerned. Books for children were in abundance on the farm, because my mother and her many siblings were all great readers. We were avid readers of comic books, bought for a few pennies apiece at the drugstore "downstreet," in the village of Rochester. We read adult literature, too, both popular and classic, which came in a never-ending stream from the libraries, rummage sales, second-hand shops, and estate auctions my grandparents haunted in their search for books. We were allowed to read anything and everything. I recall the delight in the faces of the adults when you proved you were a precocious reader by bringing up a reference to some piece of adult literature like, say, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which I read when I was ten years old. Instead of being censored in our reading, we children were encouraged to read far above our age levels, and we did so, gladly.

My grandmother, Ellen Blood Smead, a registered nurse out of Dartmouth College's nursing program, kept a shelf of her old textbooks in a glass-fronted case in the same room where we took our meals. Somehow, we children understood that these books were almost sacred, and so we never looked at them until we were alone in the house (which didn't

happen very often). But sometimes when all the adults were off the farm, and we were expected to comport ourselves in a safe and responsible manner, we took the black tomes from their row on the shelf, handling them as reverently as if they were Bibles, studying the captioned grainy black-and-white photographs of nude men and women, deformed babies, diseased limbs. Much of what I know about human anatomy, which I use in my pencil drawings, and also in my writing, dates back to my grandmother's old nursing textbooks. I remember the compelling feeling of horror and fascination that came over me as I studied photographs of two-headed babies, or conjoined twins: two people bound together as one, or one person with two faces. I felt a strange kinship with these monsters.

We children read magazines, too, especially *National Geographic*. Copies of this journal dating back to the early part of the twentieth century were stored in an upstairs closet of my great-grandmother Smead's big house, which later burned down. When my brother, aunt, and I were in the bedroom playing dress-up among the old suits and petticoats of the previous generations, I often took time out from pretending to be an adult, to sit on the end of the bed paging through photographs of big skies and oceans, leaping deer, small children with dark skin, or red hair and freckles. I put myself in every picture, imagining myself far away. Something stirred in my blood and aroused me. I became touched with wanderlust. I felt another bequest from my ancestors: the desire to roam. I knew at an early age that someday I'd be leaving the Green Mountains, though when the time came, I wasn't prepared. However, I'd practiced leave-taking many times in the pages of books and magazines I was reading.

Although literature and the environment were always inseparable in my life, I never

dreamed as a child poring over *National Geographic* that I would become a reader, writer, and critic in the academic setting. A troubled life, begun in the mountains, interrupted my schooling, though I obtained a G.E.D. at age eighteen. I became a mother that year, too, and then three more children kept me busy, while at the same time, I was working to help support my family. I pursued more education, but in slow motion. It took me over twenty years to earn an unlikely Bachelor's of Science degree in English (obtained by taking extra courses in botany, biology, and anthropology). Having the diploma in hand excited me, so after a year off, I decided to go back to school. By then, I was forty-five years old. I brought with me the only two assets I'd ever claimed: a love of books, and a bone-deep connection to the environment. By the time I entered the graduate program in English at Iowa State University, I'd read more books than I could count, and I'd spent most of my life in the out-of-doors. I decided to major in literature and creative writing, so I could keep reading and writing about the world I love.

I've always been influenced by books, reading widely for both pleasure and information. I entered graduate school reading, among other writers, Paul Theroux, an important twentieth-century stylist in both fiction and non-fiction. I had come to Theroux by way of Graham Greene, whose novel *The Heart of the Matter* I read as a teenager. I started reading Theroux when my children were young, and though I was tied down, I dreamt my way through Theroux's travel books, like *The Kingdom by the Sea* (about England) and *The Happy Isles of Oceania* (on the South Pacific). I also read Bruce Chatwin, whose strange, hilarious, semi-nonfictional history of Australian aboriginals, *The Songlines*, remains one of my favorite books of all time. For years, I've mulled over Chatwin's opening, which seems to

me a model of the perfect first sentence: “In Alice Springs—a grid of scorching streets where men in long white socks were forever getting in and out of Land Cruisers—I met a Russian who was mapping the sacred sites of the Aboriginals” (1). Everything important to me is in this sentence: a particular time and place, a landscape and its people, a journey. It is the kind of writing I like to read: fabulous, but believable. It’s the kind of writing I like to do.

I’ve always been writing, but mostly for myself, in journals. There, in the private pages of my life, I find myself searching for words to describe the world around me: trees, flowers, animals; people and buildings; sky, water. Every landscape fascinates me, and I’m always looking around at the scenery as if I were a stranger, though I feel at completely at home everywhere. My writings are a sort of mental postcard to myself, each one saying “Wish you were here.”

I had endured a traumatic displacement at the age of eleven, when my mother fled a bad second marriage, carrying four children and everything she owned across the country in a little AMC Rambler. We landed in Ames, Iowa, where her sister had been living since the early 1960s. I hated Iowa at first, and longed to return to the East. Virulent homesickness lodged in my chest and guts; I felt truly uprooted, like a plant torn from its nurturing soil. I felt myself begin to wilt and die. To get past the pain of losing my homeland, I kept reading, writing, and drawing: pursuits that made me feel whole again. Somehow, the wound of displacement healed over, and in its place, instead of a scar, was a tender feeling for every place anyone calls home. I wanted to keep writing about all those places.

One day, as an adult, flying back from a visit to Vermont, I realized I had fallen in love with Iowa. Its big skies and limitless horizons gave me a sense of expansive freedom

that I had never felt in the cloistered hills of Vermont. And something in me worshipped Iowa's extremes of heat and cold, the harsh winds, the magnificent storms that swept the prairies. I felt at home on the grasslands. I began to suspect that I would never live in Vermont again, because the home I'd imagined in the Green Mountains did not exist for me in the same way anymore. Yet I wasn't tied to Iowa, either.

Traveling around America, I discovered, to my surprise, that I loved every place I found myself in, whether city or country, mountain or desert, East or West. Nevertheless, every time I daydreamed about settling down somewhere new, my imagination immediately took wing, never satisfied being tied to only one place. Death, for me, became the only proper end to roaming. When I die, I want to shed everything earth-bound, disappearing like smoke into the big sky over some grassland or mountain, leaving behind only the trail of my writing.

What better way to spend the rest of my days on Earth than writing about its beauties and horrors? I see the Earth for what it is: a part of me; owned by me and owning me so completely I feel in my bones how I sprang from the ground. My cosmology is like that of many people who live close to the land: I find mystical fulfillment there. My economy is Earth-tutored; like my grandfather, I honestly believe it worthwhile to attempt living closer to the land. So in the final analysis, there could be no better subject for me as a writer than the Earth: its environments, its landscapes, its living creatures. I want to craft a thesis uniquely mine, a piece of work that makes a contribution to the field of academic study that comprises literature and the environment, and also to the art of creative writing.

With a double specialization in literature and creative writing, I studied under a professor from each discipline. A third professor guided me through pedagogy

considerations. In planning for my master's thesis, I decided early on to divide it into two related pieces comprising literary theory and creative writing.

In the literary theory section, I want to accomplish several goals. First, I want to introduce the English department at Iowa State University to the field of ecocriticism, the study of literature in its relationship to the physical environment. Second, I want to make a contribution to the field of ecocriticism by reading a significant twentieth-century writer through the lens of environment or place. And third, I want to develop a new apparatus for ecocritical reading.

I dropped Paul Theroux as a subject because though he is undoubtedly a literary master of place-based writing, both fiction and nonfiction, I simply didn't want to take him to bed for another entire year. True to my own reading habits, I wanted a new companion for my thesis journey. It was an easy decision to focus on an African American writer, because my literature professor, Jane Davis, had introduced me to many in the classes I took with her. And I knew that the field of ecocriticism needed to diversify in its approaches to literature and the environment. However, it was in one of Sheryl St. Germain's creative writing classes that I was introduced to Yusef Komunyakaa, whose poems made me tingle all over with recognition of the beauty and horror he found in the physical environments of his Louisiana and Vietnam. I felt I knew Komunyakaa's jungle, city, and bayou through the precision of his words and images, which evoked in me passionate memories of my own deep forests, slums, and swamps. Komunyakaa made me feel freer than I'd felt in a long time; reading his poems, I felt my spirit lift off. He was my kind of writer, abstract and precise, elegant and inscrutable. I felt lucky to be reading his poems, and so many of them burned into my soul, I

knew I wanted to include Komunyakaa in my thesis.

I also wanted to tie Komunyakaa to a particular critical apparatus, using his poetry as an exemplar to explain what I saw as the connection between literature and the environment. I had been studying biosemiotics, a field in biology that examines sign systems in nature, and I knew the discipline was very close to touching English departments in American universities. In fact, the literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt, originator of “reader-response” literary criticism, had pointed in her writings at an understanding of literature centered in biology, offering her “transactional reading” theory to explain how meaning is created between readers and texts. Rosenblatt distinguishes her transactional criticism from the objective/subjective models offered by most other forms of literary criticism by emphasizing “that particular moment of relatedness-between-the-organism-and-the-environment which we call a literary work of art” (173). This formulation of meaning implies, among other things, a biological basis for understanding literature. Rosenblatt explicitly links her transactional criticism to semiotics through Charles Saunders Peirce (c. 1938), whose works are foundational in the field of biosemiotics. My contribution to the field of literature and the environment is a critical apparatus I call “transactional ecocriticism,” borrowing from Rosenblatt’s precepts to give ecocritical pursuits a theoretical underpinning,

In “Gods Lived Under That Mud: Transactional Ecocriticism & Yusef Komunyakaa’s *Magic City*,” I introduce ecocriticism and discuss some of its critiques, one of which is the lack of diversity in the field. I borrow the term “praise songs” to characterize a type of ecocriticism (or, by extension, literature about the environment) that is monothematic, undiversified, and non-critical. I then discuss African Americans, literature, and the

environment, analyzing perceptions of black writers and the environment, and discussing “toxic discourse,” which contrasts to “praise songs” with an alternative view of literature and the environment. Uniting Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of literature with ecocriticism, I explain why this approach is well-suited to a diversity of texts that focus on the environment. A closer look at the poet Yusef Komunyakaa reveals his “writerly” philosophy of literature and the environment that closely matches Rosenblatt’s transactional theory. After discussing the roles of nature and culture in Komunyakaa’s *Magic City*, I analyze several of his poems from a transactional ecocriticism perspective. Finally, I point to places where literary theory is likely to be cross-fertilized with diverse knowledge from other disciplines, including biology.

On the creative writing side of my two-part thesis, I chose pieces I had worked on under the guidance of Sheryl St. Germain. From the beginning, I wanted to include in my thesis a collection of writings about the two places I know best: Vermont and Iowa. Like Yusef Komunyakaa, I had been writing about “home,” or a place just like it. This home, though I loved it, also frightened me and caused me pain. Long ago, I acknowledged that nature, the environment, my world, would always be a place of both beauty and horror. The thought doesn’t bother me. The aesthetics of my writing spring from my own experiences, which lead me to believe that home is nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

In “Green Mountain Girl: A Collection of Writings about Vermont and Iowa,” I explore environments where I’ve spent most of my life. From hundreds of pieces of writing, I narrowed the selection down to five. “Impala” recounts an incident in my childhood when I was given a cup of doe’s milk to drink after deer-car crash on a back-country road in

Vermont. My early life was inextricably bound up with deer because my stepfather was a hunter, and venison was often served on our table. I wrote about this incident in many different forms over the years. In this incarnation, it is an essay, which won an AWP Intro Journals Contest honorable mention in the spring of 2005. Several aesthetics informed the choices I made in this piece: I wanted to show native Vermonters in their natural environment, I wanted to use humor, and I wanted to write about a man I called Daddy, who had troubled my life in ways I internalized forever. This essay is creative nonfiction in that it blurs the boundary between truth and fiction; however, if my mother were to read it, she would probably agree every word is true.

I wrote "Deep, Fleeting Forest" as a transitional piece, specifically for this thesis, to explain how I got from Vermont, where I was born, to Iowa, where I now live. The shock of displacement was so severe that all memory of the traumatic day when I left Vermont is buried forever. What I recall are bits and pieces, a disjointed collection of images that makes me burn and sweat, even now. Yet the reason for my displacement was an act of love on my mother's part, and I try to acknowledge that here. I hope to give the reader a sense of my family, and to set the stage for the piece about my brother that follows.

My youngest brother, Lee James, was born a few months before my family left Vermont. By that time, his father, my stepfather, the man we called Daddy, had brutalized all of us into numbness with his violent, criminal acts. My mother had become a shadow, a ghost, a bone-thin scarecrow with a permanently haunted look on her face. Her final pregnancy was difficult, and when Lee James arrived, he was a puny screamer who never seemed to settle into his own skin. He was jumpy and irritable, as if he'd been poisoned by

the toxic environment he was born into. I was always close to Lee James because, eleven years older, I was, in many ways, his “other mother.” When he started showing signs of mental illness in young adulthood, I immediately recalled the sickening world of his birth, and did not wonder much what was wrong with him. Last year, Lee James had another birthday in prison. He wrote me a letter, asking me to compose a story about him for a gift. The result is “A Place to Stand in All That Water.” I never forget that, for some of us, the environment is a very small place not closely related to nature; in this case, an Iowa prison. The piece is presented as straight-forward fiction, yet every word of it is true. Some parts have been altered to disguise the innocent. The great surfer, Duke Kahanamoku, really did exist.

In my family, every generation seems destined to have its misfits and troublemakers, like my brother, and like my own son, the subject of “A Little Part of It in Everyone.” Mothers writing about troubled sons face special difficulties: it’s easy to slip into sentimentality, or on the other hand, self-justification. It’s tempting to reject the problem, or cover it up by not paying attention to it. Similarly, the environment can be a black sheep, too—as painful as a troubled son. When a geography comes to feel intolerable, it’s tempting to escape, or to deny our connection to it. I’ve often felt cursed by the environments I lived in, especially during Iowa winters, just as I’ve often felt ill because of the troubles with my son. This piece brings together winter and my son in an embrace that comes as close as I could get to the truth about my child and snow. While the incident described is not fiction, certain facts have been altered for artistic and personal reasons.

Finally, I end these selections with another essay, “Requiem for an Owl.” Ever since

childhood, I've been fascinated by large birds. As a child, I studied books about hawks, owls, and eagles, dreaming I was one of them. The bond between humans and birds is very strong, as evidenced by the big bird who lives with my son. Her name is Eliot, and she's a blue-and-gold macaw from South America. After years of knowing Eliot, I can attest that these big birds are intelligent, loving, and self-conscious. This essay is dedicated to a great-horned owl who passed through my life recently: so beautiful, bearing so much horror.

II.

Gods Lived Under That Mud:

Transactional Ecocriticism & Yusef Komunyakaa's *Magic City*

Ecocriticism: An Overview of Literature and the Environment

Ecocriticism is not a new field, yet only within the past fifteen years or so has it attracted the kind of attention that virtually guarantees its viability as a respectable academic pursuit. When the Modern Language Association (MLA) solicited comments on ecocriticism in 1999 for publication in its journal, *PMLA*, many respondents noted ecocriticism's burgeoning import in the humanities. As Jean Arnold points out:

Looking at texts for their ideas about the natural world results in a cross-fertilization of the humanities with other academic disciplines: when literature combines with biology, cultural theory, biochemistry, art, ecology, history, and other sciences, any combination of these fields forms a cauldron of brand-new perspectives. Through ecocritical practices, the humanities can play a unifying role in creating a new form of knowledge. The core of this intellectual activity spills over from the English departments into the increasing number of environmental centers on campuses across the country, where humanists and scientists collaborate. (1089-1090)

Lawrence Buell notes that while "the study of literature in relationship to physical environment dates back almost as far as literary criticism itself" (*PMLA* "Letter" 1090), only recently has the field acquired a professional organization allied with the MLA, (the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment or ASLE), and a scholarly journal (*ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*). Also, according to William

Slaymaker in the same *PMLA* forum on ecocriticism, “[t]he phenomenal growth in environmental literature and ecological literary criticism in the 1980s and 1990s is evident everywhere in world literary communities” (1100).

Evidence of ecocriticism’s growing importance in literary studies is also present in the ASLE membership directory, showing a sizable community comprising the United States, Australia, Canada, Europe, and Asia. Similarly, the ASLE website (<www.asle.umn.edu>) shows a worldwide interest in ecocriticism, with its many bibliographies, articles, syllabi, and discussion lists covering writers and subjects from around the globe. The ASLE website also lists graduate programs in literature and the environment in American colleges and universities in New Hampshire, Arizona, California, Montana, Nevada, and Oregon. The English department of my own alma mater, Iowa State University, recently proposed a program for a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in creative writing and the environment. It is hoped that the Iowa Board of Regents will approve this degree program.

Ecocriticism’s initial project was spelled out by Cheryll Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (edited by Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, 1996):

“Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Glotfelty goes on to liken ecocriticism to feminist and Marxist literary criticism, in that it examines literature from a particular critical perspective; in this case, an “earth-centered approach” (xviii). Glotfelty asks, “In addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category?” (xix). In the same book, William Howarth offers this “long-winded gloss” on what an ecocritic is and does: “[A] person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward

celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action” (69). In this respect, ecocritics share common ground with literary critics of race, class, and gender, whose readings and judgments are often played out in a seamless unity of life and work. Many practitioners of ecocriticism live and work “green,” choosing a lifestyle that is well suited to the diminished economic expectations of most literary professionals.

I entered the field of ecocriticism as a non-traditional (aged 47) graduate student at Iowa State University, working toward an M.A. in English, with a double specialization in literature and creative writing. I spent most of my life in troubled rural environments in Vermont and Iowa, encountering racism, violence, and pollution in mountains and grasslands that were incomparably beautiful in all their chaos. When I started to write, I found myself describing woods and prairies, the places bred in my bones. Coming to ecocriticism from the “real world,” where it took me over twenty years to earn a Bachelor’s of Science degree in English while working at a variety of jobs requiring manual labor in the out-of-doors, I find the conversations and tensions around culture and nature fascinating. I agree with Jean Arnold’s somewhat startling claim that ecocriticism has the power to revivify the humanities, and even create new knowledge. As for cross-fertilization, I believe it is only a matter of time until teachers in the sciences start requiring their students to take composition, literature, and creative writing classes that focus on the environment. I expect the importance of literature about the environment to grow, as understandings about how humans affect, and are affected by nature, continue to develop in the post-genomic world.

Critiques of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is not without its challengers. Notable among them is Dana Phillips, whose book *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* “attempts to rediscover, to complicate, and hence to redefine ecocriticism, where despite the relative newness of the field, or perhaps precisely because of it, some creaky old traditions have found refuge and are giving off an odor of moldy fig. . .” (ix). Phillips wants to “disenchant” ecocriticism by “deploying theoretical, philosophical, and scientific insights in the development of a rationale for describing and interpreting the multifarious relations of culture and nature in the present day, as well as in the recent past” (40-41). In response to ecocriticism’s seeming preoccupation with “moldy fig” nature writers like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Gary Snyder, whose claim to fame are their compelling “representations” of nature, Phillips says,

Ecocriticism has been full of admiration and praise for the literature it likes best: nature writing and nature poetry. In effect, ecocritics have been saying to that literature, in one essay after another, “You are beautiful.” They have gone no further than this in their commentary, and have seemed distrustful of any literary analysis that dares to be forceful—that makes critical and philosophical distinctions, and isn’t all bark and no bite. (139)

It is true that much ecocritical activity has revolved around a fairly stable canon of nature writers, with little dissent about the value and meaning of the texts. Phillips also takes issue with ecocriticism’s stance as oppositional to the academy, in that some of its practitioners believing ecocriticism has more “common sense and good stewardship” (139)

than many literary critical endeavors (which some ecocritics, perhaps justifiably, feel are somewhat divorced from reality). Phillips cites Lawrence Buell's contention in the *PMLA* forum on literatures of the environment that ecocriticism is

more like such prior critical insurgencies as feminist, ethnic, and gay revisionisms than like New Critical formalism, deconstruction, and new historicism, in that literature-and-environment studies takes its energy not from a central methodological paradigm of inquiry but from a pluriform commitment to the urgency of rehabilitating that which has been effectively marginalized by mainstream societal assumptions."

(Buell "Letter" *PMLA* 1091, qtd. in Phillips *The Truth* 138)

Not so, says Phillips. For one thing, ecocriticism has a "conservative, belletristic tenor," while at the same time, the "insurgencies" that Buell mentions are actually well entrenched in the academy, having developed a "paradigm of inquiry," whereas ecocriticism has not yet done so, according to Phillips (139). Furthermore, argues Phillips,

feminist, ethnic, and queer studies are conducted on their own behalf by women, ethnic minorities, and queers, or by sympathetic colleagues, all of whom have the signal advantage of their status as professionals. Ecocritical studies as defined by would-be realists must be conducted entirely by proxy, since neither texts nor trees, as objects rather than subjects, have any status or standing in the academy (139).

Phillips's argument works because a neither a text nor a tree is in the same category as the person represented by the critical categories of feminist, ethnic, and queer.

Phillips also deplores the ecocritic's tendency to conflate "terms and concepts of ecology and environmentalism" with "terms and concepts of literary and cultural theory"

(140). For example, Phillips cites ecocritic William Rueckert's assertion that a poem is a model of an ecosystem (141). Phillips argues that this is a faulty analogy, because a poem is a discrete cultural production, unlike an ecosystem, which happens everywhere always, through the non-teleological actions of biology, geology, climate and so on. Furthermore, a poem has a limit, which, once reached, exhausts the poem's usefulness. No one wants to live on just one poem, whereas, theoretically, at least, one could usefully live in just one ecosystem: "... forced to live in an atmosphere of just one poem, no matter how good that one poem might be, most of us would soon begin to feel restless and to wish that the one poem could be 'used up,' and the sooner the better, so that we might look for imaginative sustenance elsewhere" (141). According to Phillips, "Rueckert's view of literature is based on an analogy that is at best overstated and at worst entirely false" (143). Ecocritics are mistaken to believe that the best "nature writing" is that which most closely represents the original in nature, and even more mistaken to think that such literature is equivalent to nature itself.

However, Phillips acknowledges, "the complexity of language, poetic language in particular, is expressive of the complexity of nature at least some of the time" (144). Phillips advocates a kind of nature writing that is representative, but artfully selective, or even eliminative, of details, in the way that Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds*, elaborating his system for identifying birds, uses "field marks" to give birders the "mimetic" experience of the actual bird. (This book was part of the literary furniture of my childhood, because my mother is a lifelong bird-watcher. I well remember studying Peterson's black silhouettes of birds to discover their identifying shapes against a sky full of glare.)

Phillips explains, "A field mark is any distinctive feature setting one species of bird

apart from others, especially its near congeners [members of the same species]: barred tail feathers, eyebrow ridges, a curved bill, and unusual flight pattern, and so on" (173). Phillips claims that Peterson's type of abstract mimesis is actually better at rendering a recognizable version of nature than something more representative, like a photograph, or even a closely rendered written description (174). Peterson's field-mark system works so well because it is only "accidentally mimetic," relying not on representational sameness, but on *difference*, to distinguish one bird, especially a close relative, from another (175). Also, in order to comprehend the individual bird in the environment, the bird-watcher must have a "transaction" with the environment, going back and forth between the actual experience of the bird and the text describing it, while at the same time, employing tools like binoculars to aid in the operation of identification (179).

In conclusion, Phillips states, "The upshot of all this is that Peterson's *Field Guide* resembles the perpetually open texts celebrated by recent literary theory: no 'reading' of the *Field Guide* ever achieves 'closure,' even as theory has foretold" (180). However, it is debatable whether most literary professionals would classify the *Field Guide* as literature in the strictest sense of the word.

Another critique of ecocriticism is that the field is not diverse enough—in its practitioners, in the texts they read, write, and criticize, and in the conclusions they reach. As Michael P. Cohen argues,

In its enthusiasm to disseminate ideas, a certain version of narrative ecocriticism might be better described as praise than criticism. I call this version of ecocriticism the "praise-song school" . . . In style, much so-called "narrative scholarship" is not

sharply analytical but gracefully meditative; in homage to Thoreau, perhaps, it includes the first person. Narrative scholars look at landscapes not as fields for argument, but as scenes for reconciliation--of the wilderness ethic with the stewardship ethic, of nature with culture. Such lyrical, nearly religious work approaches a timeless harmony, and seems to be beyond rational scrutiny. (par. 63-65)

Cohen also describes one of the enduring problems of ecocriticism: its lack of diversity from perspectives of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Noting "clear evidence of growing interest in environmental and social justice issues" (par. 79), a Caucus for Diversity was formed within ASLE in 1999, of which Cohen was a founding member. In their letter to the executive council of ASLE, the caucus asks for more diversity in conference proceedings (ASLE Caucus "Letter").

Similarly, ecocritic Michael Bennett notes in "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglas, and the Nature of Slavery," that in theory, "ecocriticism could be applied to any cultural artifact," but in practice, "ecocriticism has tended to focus on the genre of nature writing, a designation usually reserved for essays about the two environments most removed from human habitation: the pastoral and the wild" (195). Bennett goes on to ask, "[W]hat use is ecocriticism if the culture under consideration has a different relationship with pastoral space and wilderness than the ideal kinship that most nature writers and ecocritics assume or seek?" (195). Bennett is interested in the anti-pastoralism evident in Frederick Douglas's slave narrative: while the pastoral impulse in the antebellum South conceived of an Edenic nature in which the fruits of the Earth sprang forth unaided by human intervention, the reality of slavery created an anti-pastoral sentiment in slave narrators, who "brought the fruits of

southern agriculture and husbandry to the tables of the white ruling classes" (199). Therefore, African Americans may not share the celebratory views of nature held by many nature writers and ecocritics.

In the *PMLA* forum on literature and environment, Elizabeth Dodd notes "African Americans seem largely absent from this burgeoning literary, cultural, and critical movement" (1094). She continues,

[Nature writing] has not attracted many black writers, who likely find that what Robinson Jeffers calls inhumanism—the literary attempt to deflect aesthetic and thematic attention away from human beings [...]—holds little appeal for writers who already feel themselves politically, economically, and socially marginalized" (1095).

Dodd goes on to urge the ecocritical community not to "inadvertently ghettoize black literature, as if it had nothing to contribute to our understanding of the vexed human relation to the nonhuman world" (1095).

African Americans and the Environment: Love and Toxic Discourse

The idea that African Americans as a group are alienated from nature or the environment may be yet another misconception perpetuated by whites whose contact with blacks is limited by personal, geographic, and socioeconomic boundaries. For example, in the essay "Earthbound: on Solid Ground," literary critic bell hooks refutes the notion that African Americans are disconnected from nature, recalling her childhood in the Kentucky hills, "surrounded by a wilderness of honeysuckle, wild asparagus and sheltering trees, bushes shielding growing crops, the huge garden of a black landowner" (67). (The feeling of

attachment hooks has for the environment of her childhood is what the cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan calls “topophilia.”)

Only when hooks left her rural home for the city did she begin to understand “the contempt for country folk that abounds in our nation” (68). This negative view is partially perpetuated by academic practitioners who harbor conscious or unconscious prejudices against farmers and others who live close to the land, reenacting a classic schism between city and country. Many urbanites harbor a supercilious sense of their own worth in comparison to “country folk,” especially in places with large rural populations. In addition, some ecocritics do not acknowledge that topophilia, or love of place, accounts for human attachments to many diverse environments, not just ones that are wild or “natural.” It seems that love of place is innate, no matter what kind of environment that place is in.

bell hooks received a legacy of wisdom from her experiences in the rural South, articulated by her sharecropping grandfather: “I’ll tell you a secret little girl. No man can make the sun or the rains come—we can all testify. We can all see that ultimately we all bow down to the forces of nature. Big white boss may think he can outsmart nature but the small farmer knows. Earth is our witness” (69). hooks locates a source of empowerment in an intimacy with the Earth, exhorting her readers to “[s]tand on solid ground and be a true witness” (71).

At the same time, the post-WW II migration of black laborers from the South to the North complicated the relationship of many African Americans to the land. The exchange of a land-based personal economy to one centered in industrial cities resulted in a change of voice and perspective in African American writings from rural to urban. Yet, instead of

African Americans as a group being somehow alienated from nature or the environment, it is likely that many blacks' writings with an environmental focus were and are not produced or read for the same reason that their other writings have been marginalized and ignored: because whites in power assume African Americans have nothing of value to say about the subject. It is not that African American writers are silent about their relationship with nature, it is that "few African American voices are *recognized* as part of nature writing and ecocriticism" (Armbruster 2 [emphasis mine]). This limitation is part of the problem Dana Phillips mentions when he complains about ecocritical scholars being less critical and more celebratory, choosing texts to criticize that they already find "beautiful." Because beauty is in the eye of the beholder, such texts that are engaged by (mostly white) ecocritics tend to be about environments they recognize. Writings that represent nature or environments from alternative viewpoints may be unthinkingly dismissed.

However, despite love of place, it is indisputable that many African Americans have a "vexed" relationship with the environment. The Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University reports,

Throughout the history of development, transnational corporations (and groups before them) have exploited natural and human resources for their own profit and power with little regard for the social, political, economic, and environmental impacts on local groups. The American South is no different. It has always been thought of as a backward land, based on its social, economic, political, and environmental policies. "By default, the region became a 'sacrifice zone,' a dump for the rest of the nation's toxic waste. A colonial mentality exists in the South, where local government and big

business take advantage of people who have been historically, politically and economically powerless. Many of these attitudes emerged from the region's marriage to slavery and the plantation system -- a brutal system that exploited humans and the land." (Jackson and Bullard "From Plantations to Plants, A Context" at the EJRC website, as cited.)

Robert D. Bullard defines "environmental racism" as "any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color" (Bullard 90-91). The effects of such policies and practices can be devastating:

There is clear evidence that racism influences the likelihood of exposure to environmental and health risks. Examples abound among migrant farm workers poisoned by pesticides and African-American and Latino children damaged by lead. Ironically, the people most likely to be exposed to harmful chemicals are also the least likely to have medical insurance. (92)

Lawrence Buell, in *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*, calls writings like Bullard's "toxic discourse," defining it as "expressed anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency" (31). Toxic discourse, while often found in reports and other non-literary forms of writing, also appears in many kinds of literature, including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Noting that such discourse can provide common ground for many disparate groups, Buell says, "[t]hough toxic discourse may exacerbate social divisions when it summons up 'the environment of the poor' against the rich, and be a bone of

contention between the countries of the North and the South, and between corporate and individual interests, it also may be a common denominator: a shared vocabulary, a shared concern" (34). Buell notes that toxicity is a "widely shared paradigm of cultural self-identification," and foretells a time to come when previously unrelated individuals and communities around the world might have to cooperate as "disaster subcultures" in the wake of environmental disruptions (53). This prediction calls to mind the remarkable worldwide bonding that followed in the wake of last year's Christmas tsunami.

However, the literature of toxicity is a special case of nature writing that many ecocritics spurn because it makes them uncomfortable, implying as it does a need for nature writers to get cozy with horrific aspects of nature and culture, and our shared complicity in the human creation of such places and states. It takes courage and stamina to imagine and engage with an Earth that is violent, poisoned, toxic, contagious, and threatening. It takes even more guts to live and work there. In the interest of "walking the talk," perhaps ecocritics should enthusiastically embrace not only beautiful texts celebrating nature, but also toxic discourse, in order to establish their connection with those whose lives are affected most by the troubles between nature and culture.

Ecocriticism and Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Literature

Ecocriticism's challengers can be answered elegantly by Louise Rosenblatt, a literary theorist who is not usually associated with ecocriticism, and who has been marginalized in some respects by mainstream literary professionals, because of her association with children's literature and theories of reading. In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: A*

Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978), Rosenblatt distinguishes between two types of reading: efferent and aesthetic. An efferent reader is engaged with writing that informs or describes, such as a law book, or a recipe, giving the reader something useful to “carry away” (23-24). Roger Tory Peterson’s *Field Guide to the Birds* would fit into this category, although his visual identification field-mark drawings, in their abstract imagery, have something in common with the language of poetry, as Dana Phillips observes.

On the other hand, according to Rosenblatt, an aesthetic reader turns to literature for the experience itself: “the reader’s primary concern is with what happens *during* the actual reading event” (24). Not surprisingly, Rosenblatt uses many examples of nature writing to illustrate her meaning:

Though, like the efferent reader of a law text, say, the reader of Frost’s “Birches” must decipher the images or concepts or assertions that the words point to, he also pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him. “Listening to” himself, he synthesizes these elements into a meaningful structure. *In aesthetic reading, the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text.* (24-25)

It is this experience of “lived through” that makes nature writing so real to many ecocritical readers, tempting them to equate it with nature itself. If ecocritics are mostly people who would rather be hiking, then it makes sense they would bring to nature writing their own experiences and desires, receiving, in turn, just what they are looking for in literature: the lived-through experience of the natural world. In Rosenblatt’s transactional

theory, what ecocritics bring to texts about nature becomes part of what they find in writings about nature. The tendency of these transactions between ecocritics and what they read to be self-reinforcing accounts for the solipsistic nature of the “praise-song” school of ecocriticism.

However, not all ecocritics are looking for purely untroubled relationships with nature or literature—and not all nature writers are writing purely celebratory views of an environment unspoiled by humans. In fact, Frost’s “Birches” is a troublesome poem in some ways. It describes birch trees that have been bent and twisted in an ice storm, proposing that it might be more agreeable to think the trees had been mutilated by a small boy, much like the narrator once was himself, swinging from branches for amusement:

One by one he subdued his father's trees
 By riding them down over and over again
 Until he took the stiffness out of them,
 And not one but hung limp, not one was left
 For him to conquer. (From the poem cited, in the public domain.)

Reading Frost’s poem again in the context of my argument, I find myself smiling, imagining a “green” ecocritic growing huffy over the child’s wanton ruination of the birches. Moreover, what would the ecocritic make of “subdued” and “conquered?” Yet I experience this poem as a “lived-through” experience of nature or the environment, because Frost’s images stir up fond memories of my own childhood climbing trees, and I agree with him when he says:

It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood

Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs

Broken across it, and one eye is weeping

From a twig's having lashed across it open

I'd like to get away from earth awhile

And then come back to it and begin over. ("Birches")

Frost's lines could easily describe the sentiments of any number of literary professionals, who, weary of the push and shove through the thickets of culture and nature, long for a chance to leave Earth awhile—in the pages of a good book.

Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature, positing an intimate relationship between reader, text, and environment, is well suited to ecocriticism because it helps explain how texts are connected to nature through human beings. It also provides ecocritics with a theoretical foundation for criticisms, and an open door for further interdisciplinary investigations into understanding how the human imagination affects, and is affected by, both nature and culture. Rosenblatt's transactional theory is what Dana Phillips calls a "rationale for describing and interpreting the multifarious relations of culture and nature" (40-41). Most important, transactional ecocriticism supports the idea that ecocritics *matter*.

Yusef Komunyakaa and Transactional Ecocriticism

It was in the context of the troubled relationship between culture and the environment that the Pulitzer prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa came of age. Born in 1947, Komunyakaa grew up in Bogalusa, Louisiana, an industrial and agricultural city in the Deep South, ninety miles north of New Orleans. In "Dark Waters," an essay written for inclusion in

The Colors of Nature, Komunyakaa describes the place of his origin as a “hotbed for racism” in the 1950s, citing examples of segregation, white-supremacist activity, Civil Rights protests, and racially motivated murders (98-99). The area was also affected by industry, particularly logging, with all its attendant evils: “[w]hen it came to the politics of pollution and dumping of hazardous waste in the black community, many of us understood it was business as usual—a reflection of the national psyche” (108). In Komunyakaa’s view, Bogalusa’s problems with racism and environmental despoilment sprang from the same source—the arrogance of “evil men who walk around / polluting the earth” (Antonio Machado “He andado muchos caminos,” qtd. in Komunyakaa “Dark Waters” 109-110).

“Coming of age, I was fully aware of both the natural beauty and the social terror surrounding me,” says Komunyakaa (“More than a state” 163). His sentiments about his childhood home are typical of the way many African Americans of his generation feel about the social and natural environment: “I have a love-hate complex with Bogalusa. The place still affects how I live and think. Its beauty and horror shaped the intensity of my observations. . . . Now years after my book *Magic City* [poems set in Bogalusa], I realize that I had attempted to present how toxicity taints the social and natural landscape” (*Colors of Nature* 101).

However, Komunyakaa never thought of himself as writing from a particularly African American perspective:

I have never thought about the issue of blackness as subject matter for my poetry per se, but I suppose it has a lot to do with my perspective in terms of the shape of my emotional life. How I began to look at the world early on informed the shape of my

adult artistic life, but I don't think I'd like to sit down and face the page and say: "I am now going to write as a black man." I don't entertain that thought, because I know who I am, and I don't have to face the mirror every day to remind myself. I've always accepted who I am and have hoped to let that direct my poetic vision. (*Blue Notes* 28)

By the time Komunyakaa got around to publishing *Magic City*, he had already written several books of poetry, including his war poems about Vietnam in *Dien Cai Dau*. He credits his experience of writing the "dark" poems of Vietnam (which have a searing environmental focus) with giving him the perspective to write about his childhood in the polluted environment of the Jim Crow South (*Blue Notes* 117). Komunyakaa had already established a pattern of creating distance from potentially explosive personal material by waiting fourteen years to write about his experiences in Vietnam. Consequently, his poems have a certain "objectivity" that is absent in the works of many autobiographical poets. When an interviewer asked him about this stance, Komunyakaa replied by saying, "I wanted the images to do the work—I wanted to avoid statement, if possible" (*Blue Notes* 116). Instead, Komunyakaa chose to "attempt to show every little corner of the picture And in that sense, the reader or the listener enters in as an active participant of meaning, definition" (*Blue Notes* 117). Komunyakaa remarks, "my idea is to—if possible—create a situation where the listener or the reader can be co-creators. And if possible, whenever that happens, we can say it's working" (*Blue Notes* 123).

Komunyakaa invites readers and listeners to participate in a "lived through" experience of the environment in his *Magic City* poems by showing "every little corner" of Bogalusa, but not "preaching" (*Blue Notes* 117). Komunyakaa's approach to the poetry of his

childhood environment closely follows the notions proffered by Dana Phillips in his example of Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds*. Instead of trying to paint an exhaustively realistic portrait of his environment, Komunyakaa practices a kind of abstract mimesis, paring away language until all that remains are powerful words, images, and ideas about nature and culture that speak to what readers themselves bring to the text:

Sometimes I may not like a poem in the first reading, but, when I go back and read it again, there is a growth that has happened within me, and I become a participant rather than just a reader. I try to encourage this sort of participation in my own poetry—I try to create a space into which a reader can come and participate in the meaning. For me a poem shouldn't have a resolution. I try to cultivate an open-endedness that invites the reader to enter, not merely to read the poem as an outsider but to experience it from within. I'm not talking about the physics of chance but about an enjoyment culled from hard work—a connection fused by interactive minds. (*Blue Notes* 30)

Komunyakaa's explanation mirrors Dana Phillips's idea that literature, especially nature writing, should be "perpetually open," requiring readers to engage in "transactions," rather than being force-fed "praise song" nature descriptions that are purely celebratory or informative. And Komunyakaa's view is exactly what Louise Rosenblatt means by the transactional theory of literature—but from the writer's point of view instead of the reader's.

Transactional ecocriticism is also a way to understand and critique diverse literary works without resorting to over-simplifying labels like "black," "queer," or "feminist." It is an especially useful lens through which to read the poems of Yusef Komunyakaa, suffused as

they are with his observations of culture and nature, yet structured for open-ended engagement with the reader. And Komunyakaa's environments in his poems are beautiful and monstrous at the same time, allowing many diverse readers and listeners to enter from their own experiences of culture and nature. I enter his poems as a mature (white) woman of forty-something from troubled rural landscapes of racism, violence, and toxic discourse, but also incomparable beauty. In Yusef Komunyakaa's poems, I find places and voices I recognize and understand.

Culture and Nature in the Magic City

The poems of *Magic City* deal with Yusef Komunyakaa's early life in Bogalusa, Louisiana. "Childhood may be a rich source of creative tension, but writing about childhood can be dangerous," says one of Komunyakaa's foremost critics, Angela M. Salas. "It is hard to be objective about one's childhood, and if one cannot be objective—if one is simply kicking against old injustices and the way they made one feel—then one's work is unlikely to be interesting or artful" (59). What is interesting and artful to the ecocritic about Komunyakaa's *Magic City* poems is the way the environment of Bogalusa figures in them as a place of both love and toxicity. "The place was there, brimming in mossy quietude," says Komunyakaa, "before the axes began to swing—cutting down the virgin pine forest on July 4, 1914, when the town was incorporated. The name comes from the Native American-named creek, 'Boge Lusa,' where smoke-dark waters flow through the city" ("Dark Waters" 98). Salas remarks that the name Magic City was what the Choctaw tribe once called Bogalusa (55).

Komunyakaa establishes a human relationship with nature in the opening poem of the collection, “Venus’s-flytraps”:

I am five,
 Wading out into deep
 Sunny grass,
 Unmindful of snakes
 & yellowjackets, out
 To the yellow flowers
 Quivering in sluggish heat. (1)

These lines, staggered on the page in a way that suggests a small child pushing his way through tall grass, intimate that nature, even in its unsullied state, as seen through the eyes of a child, is not without its complications. While snakes and yellow jackets may be of interest to herpetologically or entomologically inclined ecocritics, most would not let their five-year-old child wade amongst them unattended. Yet it is precisely this freedom to explore, ask questions, take risks, and reach for answers, that hones the narrator’s perceptions of the environment, and invites the reader into the poem, where there is likely to be “sluggish heat.”

In addition, the narrator’s fascination with the yellow Venus’s-flytraps foreshadows how nature often functions in Komunyakaa’s poems: beautiful, yet mysterious and somewhat threatening. The Venus’s-flytrap of the poem’s title is rare and poorly understood; even now, scientists do not fully understand the molecular processes behind the plant’s “trap” that snaps shut on insects, which the plant then devours. And the strangeness of the Venus’s-flytrap, a

sort of botanical chimera, points to the relationship in nature and culture between the known and the unknown, the beautiful and the monstrous. These themes are pervasive throughout Komunyakaa's works, informing the sophistication of his nature observations.

For example, in "April's Anarchy," a poem celebrating the arrival of spring, Komunyakaa opens with,

All five shades of chameleon
 Came alive on the cross-hatched
 Snakeskin, & a constellation
 Of eyes flickered in the thicket
 As quail whooped up from sagebrush.
 I duck-walked through mossy slag
 Where a turtledove's call
 Held daylight to the ground. (16)

These lines portray the simple beauty of springtime in April: the color, movement, and sound of creatures that inhabit the woods. The language so powerfully connects to the reader's understanding of nature precisely because it is abstract in the same way that Roger Tory Peterson's black outline of a bird's wing is. These lines give nature-lovers any number of places to "live through" the outdoor experience. And the "I" of the poem is the same kind of narrator often found in the praise-song school of ecocriticism, the participant-observer whose relationship with the natural world is spiritually uplifting. This is the kind of nature writing most ecocritics find "beautiful." However, the mood of the poem shifts quickly:

Vines climbed barbed wire

& leapt down blacktop,
 Snuck down back alleys,
 Disguised with white blossoms,
 Just to get a stranglehold
 On young Judas trees.
 Thorns nicked my left ear. (16)

Now I find I must enter into Komunyakaa's poem from a new perspective, in order to understand the contrast between the pastoral tone of the first group of lines, and the ominous sense of nature in these. I slip in, bringing to the text my own experience with vines, the most vexing of which, to me, is poison ivy. I have a hate-hate relationship with that vine, being severely allergic to it. I am about to enter into a transaction with Komunyakaa's poem, where it becomes meaningful to me, though the meaning is, in part, determined by what I bring to the text. What I bring is a trail of associations having to do with flowers and vines. And while this set of associations and inferences may be simply a reader-response, it is infused with my own scientific knowledge of both nature and culture. Yet what is important about these lines is not that Komunyakaa's descriptions are botanically accurate, but that the images he calls up may be experienced by anyone who's known the strangling power of vines.

To me, Komunyakaa's lines also evoke kudzu, another unpleasant vine, a rapid-growing, invasive species that often smothers out all other forms of plant life in the South. The image of vines disguised in "white blossoms," climbing, leaping, and sneaking through barbed wire, down blacktop and back alleys, stirs up associations in my mind with lynch mobs and cross-burners, because a prominent white-supremacist group in post-slavery

Louisiana was called the Knights of the White Camellia. Their symbol was the pure-white blossom of the camellia shrub (from which English Earl Grey tea is obtained). This association of white flowers with white supremacists is repeated in a later poem in *Magic City*, “Knights of the White Camellia & Deacons of Defense” (54).

The word “stranglehold” and the image of the Judas tree also evoke, for me, the idea of death by hanging, as legend has it that Judas Iscariot committed suicide by hanging himself from this type of redbud tree. (It is said the tree covers itself in red flowers each spring because it is blushing in shame.) The thorns of the following line echo the barbed wire preceding, and these images, to me, evoke Christ on the cross, with His crown of thorns. All these images point to the “anarchy” of the title.

The next few lines reveal the narrator’s reaction to these disturbing images drawn from nature in springtime:

A hum rushed through leaves
Like something I could risk
Putting my hands on. (16)

These lines offer the kind of indeterminacy that invites deeper participation in the meaning of the poem: what each reader finds will reflect what he or she brings to the text. I find here an association with the hum of desire one often senses in springtime, the “something” that invites hands-on risk: spring fever. The past, with its anarchies and losses, seems not to matter so much when love is in the air. Science might contest the idea that spring brings a hum through leaves, but this is not important in the reading of poetry. What is important is whether the reader feels a “lived-through” experience of what the words evoke.

To me, this kind of experience of the environment is worth more than any amount of science, though I am not averse to science, and even embrace it. My construction of meaning in the indeterminate lines of Komunyakaa's poem seems to be confirmed by those that follow:

What April couldn't fix
 Wasn't worth the time:
 Egg shell & dried placenta
 Light as memory.
 Patches of fur, feathers,
 & bits of skin. A nest
 Of small deaths among anemone (16).

Komunyakaa is hopeful here, though his hope is complicated, as the last lines of "April's Anarchy" attest:

A canopy edged over, shadowplaying
 The struggle underneath
 As if it never happened (16).

Komunyakaa's hope is not guilt-edged, as in the "praise song" school. Instead it invokes a larger field above the struggle on earth, not a heavenly paradise, but a canopy of trees in sunlight, another level, worlds within worlds, an alternative view from literature of the environment..

My ecocritical reading of Yusef Komunyakaa's poems would be incomplete if I didn't mention toxic discourse. Of course, the tensions of culture and the environment are played out in many of Komunyakaa's poems, and many explicitly evoke the toxicity of the

social and natural landscape of Bogalusa, Louisiana. However, one of the especially powerful poems in *Magic City* is “The Millpond”:

They looked like wood ibis
 From a distance, & as I got closer
 They became knots left for the gods
 To undo, like bows tied
 At the center of weakness.
 Shadow to light, mind to flesh,
 Swamp orchids quivered under green hats,
 Nudged by slate-blue catfish
 Headed for some boy’s hook
 On the other side. The day’s
 Uncut garments of fallen chances
 Stumbled among flowers
 That loved only darkness,
 As afternoon came through the underbrush
 Like a string of firecrackers
 Tied to a dog’s tail (17).

These opening lines of the poem’s first section, with the vague subject “they,” offer a sense of indeterminacy and open-endedness about the narrator’s stance toward nature. The lyrical lines about wood ibis and swamp orchids evoke impossibly beautiful, exotic birds and flowers, the kinds of flora and fauna that make one want to fall down and worship the Earth.

But what exactly are these bow-tied knots for the gods? Where—or what—is the center of weakness? And what sort of narrator notices “Shadow to light/Mind to flesh” in the same breath as “firecrackers/Tied to a dog’s tail?” This voice is a pastiche of the romantic or the pastoral, beginning with a high-minded view that devolves into a brutal joke. These lines take a postmodern, ironically detached stance, but a position that transcends love-hate into *recognition*, an acknowledgement of the spirit of a place:

Gods lived under that mud
 When I was young & sublimely
 Blind. Each bloom a shudder
 Of uneasiness, no sound
 Except the whippoorwill.
 They conspired to become twilight
 & metaphysics, as five-eyed
 Fish with milky bones
 Flip-flopped in oily grass. (17)

These lines deliver a one-two punch, with their evocation of the spirituality in nature, followed by the monstrous image of deformed fish dying in the defiled landscape of the millpond—a place where logs are seasoned by immersing them in a chemical bath:

We sat there as the moon rose
 Up from chemical water,
 Phosphorous as an orange lantern.
 An old man shifted

His three-pronged gig
 Like a New Guinea spear,
 So it could fly quicker
 Than a frog's tongue or angry word.
 He pointed to snapping turtles
 Posed on cypress logs,
 Armored in stillness,
 Slow kings of a dark world. (17)

Commenting about this poem, Komunyakaa says, "For me, the millpond—a hundred yards or so from our house—was always a place of ritual. We fished there. And sometimes we even swam in the dark water. But in the back of my mind, I was always suspect of this slow-running pond. I think the poem "The Millpond" attempts to focus on my apprehensions" ("Dark Waters" 101). These apprehensions, this suspicion, make "The Millpond" a form of toxic discourse. "Chemical water" is a place where many readers, writers, and critics of literature and the environment—as well as those who love to fish—find community. Nevertheless, "The Millpond" is ultimately a poem that retains indeterminacy and open-endedness about the cultural and natural environment. As the narrator, a youthful dreamer fishing in poisoned waters, says,

After a rain crawfish surfaced
 To grab the salt meat
 Tied to the nylon string,
 Never knowing when they left

The water & hit the bottom
 Of my tincan. They clung
 To desire, like the times
 I clutched something dangerous & couldn't let go. (18)

There are many ways to be in and out of nature and culture, many ways to cling to the beauty and horror that is life on Earth.

Cross-fertilizations

While some of ecocritical methods and claims may seem, at times, overblown or overstated, such as the conflation of literature and nature, or the idea that place transcends other critical categories, ecocriticism's hope for an interdisciplinary approach leading to the creation of new knowledge about the troubles between culture and nature is just as valid as the aspiration of religion or science to ask questions and offer suggestions about how we should live on the Earth. I agree with critiques of ecocriticism that exhort its practitioners to be more attentive to diverse peoples, places, and texts. One of ecocriticism's allures is its theoretical ability to unite readers and writers around their love of place—which does, indeed, seem to be one thing we all hold in common.

However, inviting diversity in ecocriticism requires embracing alternative ideas about nature and culture. Praise songs and toxic discourse are only two of many viewpoints that can be put into conversation about nature and culture. Speaking of the environment of Vietnam (though he could have been talking about Vermont, or Iowa, or anywhere, for that matter), Yusef Komunyakaa says,

For me, when I went to Vietnam, I did not fear the land. I realized a kind of beauty in the overall landscape. And many times that is what we have, beauty and violence side by side. We have been taught to see that as a contradiction, but, to me, contradiction is a sort of discourse. You have this push and pull in everything. It's underneath everything. That's what nature is about. And that is what creative energy is about. That's what the chemistry of the mind is about as well. (*Blue Notes* 78)

The transactional theory of ecocriticism situates readers, writers, and texts in environments where cycles of human activity affect, and are affected by, both nature and culture. Louise Rosenblatt remarks, "[T]he transactional view, freeing us from the old separation between the human creature and the world, reveals the individual consciousness as a continuing self-ordering, self-creating process, shaped by and shaping a network of interrelationships with its environing social and natural matrix" (172). By placing human beings in their correct relationship to the rest of the world, Rosenblatt's transactional principles support Jean Arnold's assertion that ecocriticism has the power to revitalize the humanities. Cross-fertilized by ideas from biology, botany, geology, art, history, and so on, transactional ecocriticism has the power to bring forth new ways to understand Earth, where gods live under that mud.

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III.

Green Mountains & Grasslands:

A Collection of Writings About Vermont and Iowa

To my mother, Barb,

my brother, Lee,

and my son, Marshall:

with love, always

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Impala

One midnight long ago, I was riding in a Chevy Impala when the man I called Daddy wrecked the car by hitting a deer in the back woods of Vermont. One minute we were flying through the trees, low-slung headlights piercing the deep forest, tail fins sailing behind like the wings of a red rocket, the only travelers on a mountain road; the next, we slammed into the doe, sending the world into a tailspin. I was only a child at the time, yet I remember the accident vividly. I learned something from it, though what it was I couldn't say until much later. Lie and steal was one lesson I learned, but don't get caught, if you're smart. If you do get caught, hold your head high, offering your wrists to the cuffs with a devil-may-care smile. Those were lessons I learned from Daddy. But that night, squatting beside a dying deer on a dark country road deep in the Appalachian highlands, I also learned another kind of lesson, the kind taught only in close meetings between ourselves and the animals. That deer got inside me, affecting me in ways I still don't understand, despite a lifetime of wondering.

The man I called Daddy was not my father. My own father, Robert Montoya Brown, a Southern boy from Tennessee, had written a "Dear Jane" letter to my mother when he was in the Army, vanishing after a posting to Greenland during the Cold War. He had a history of disappearing because he came from a long line of disappearing fathers. After he left, I never

saw him again. My mother (whose real name was Barbara, not Jane), crept home to Vermont with me and my brother, Stephen, in tow.

There we lived with my grandparents and aunts and uncles amongst books and horses and cats and dogs on the rocky, steeply-sloping Smead farm of two houses, one barn, and one sugar shed set into small pastures above Rochester village in the foothills of the Green Mountain National Forest. One Saturday night, my mother, who (like her father) was a mill worker at Weyerhaeuser Lumber, ran into the man I would come to know as Daddy at a roadhouse dance over by White River Junction. Daddy, whose real name was Mervin Breton, came from a large family notorious in Rochester for their twelve wild boys, said to be half-Mohawk Indian.

The last time Barbara had seen Mervin, sometime before she'd left Vermont for the Army and the South, he'd been a sullen teenager with backswept black hair, gassing up cars at his older brother's garage in town, always with a lit cigarette dangling from his lip. Now he was grown up, with a man's hard face and softball-sized biceps bulging under the thin black nylon of his shirt. Standing with his back to the bar, one foot up on the rail, he nursed a bottle of Schlitz, watching my mother's every move with an inscrutable expression on his dark, handsome face. Barbara flirted and danced, but while she was having fun in the arms of other men, she felt Mervin's eyes on her.

Later that evening, when my mother got next to Mervin at the bar during a break in the dancing, she found his body warm, as if an engine inside constantly raced with a soundless roar. His smooth brown forearm lying next to hers on the bar was covered with a light sheen of sweat. He smelled of Brylcreem, cigarette smoke, and liquor: an odor Barbara

found exciting. They exchanged a few words, but because they were not strangers to each other, nothing much needed to be said.

When Mervin finally had Barbara in his arms, she found that she was at least an inch taller, though most of it was the bouffant arrangement of hair on the top of her head. Mervin was a good dancer, light on his feet and courteous, right up to the moment at the end of the two-step when he thrust against Barbara's thigh with his pelvis, and she felt something rock-hard dig into her flesh.

A few months later, hearing the gossip about my mother and Mervin, Grandpa Smead kicked her (and us) out, thundering, "You've made your bed, now lie in it!" After that, Mervin lived sometimes with his parents, sometimes with his older brothers, and sometimes with my mother in the house trailer she'd bought on the White River flats between Rochester and Granville.

I don't remember when I first started calling him Daddy.

The night Daddy hit the deer, I was kneeling on the back seat of the car he'd borrowed from his brother Everett's garage, staring out the rear window at the wall of woods closing in behind us, a tunnel of trees illuminated by our passage that seemed to spiral away in an endless vanishing point. It was dark, and recently had been raining, but I couldn't tell if it was still coming down or not, because the trees were all dripping, their broad, slick leaves shiny-black-wet, or needled branches bowing under loads of moisture. The evergreens and maples yearned toward each other in our wake, as if trying to close up the gap that was the road. We were in deep forest, on one of Daddy's so-called shortcuts. We were probably not lost, but we might have been for all I knew, because often with Daddy it seemed like we

didn't know where we were going.

The only light along the road came from clearings hacked out of the forest, little shacks with wrecked cars and chained dogs in bare muddy yards, lit by naked lamps burning on rickety porches. As we passed each cleared smallholding, the tang of wood smoke and wet dog and garbage wafted into the car, a comforting smell, like the warm blankets of home. Rags of mist and smoke curled up in our wake as we careened upward at what my mother called a "good clip," swinging through the switchbacks, climbing higher and higher. We were traveling fast, as fast as you can go when conditions are bad, yet you are still in a hurry to get away. Daddy always drove fast, no matter where he was going, or for what reason.

The warm interior was stuffy with the rich smell of new car, infused with Brylcreem, booze fumes, and cigarette smoke. The radio scratched out some faint music interrupted by voices. On the front seat next to Daddy sat my mother, who had been keeping an eye on me because I was feeling car sick.

"Diana!" she said over her shoulder. "Turn around and sit down. Face forward!"

"Don't let her throw up," Daddy warned.

His voice was thick with liquor.

"Go to sleep," my mother added.

I should have been sleeping. I was in my yellow baby-doll pajamas, and there was a soft red-and-gold plaid car blanket on the seat beside me. But it was impossible to rest when Daddy was driving. Plunging down a deep dip, we were momentarily airborne, then with a flying thump, regained the road on the other side. We called these mountain dips "granny jump ups," and they were fun to take fast.

“Oh, my God!” exclaimed my mother.

I grinned with joy.

Kneeling on the seat, watching the world fly away from me at what seemed like the speed of light, balanced between the flying past and the rushing future, I rocked from side to side, swinging my long, blonde hair.

Suddenly my stomach heaved violently, and a cold sweat broke out on my upper lip. My mouth filled with saliva. I turned around and sat down with a bounce, facing forward. The glowing dashboard with its twinkling silver dials, the chrome buttons and knobs and ashtrays all softly sparkling and gleaming, wove a matrix of light in which I was gently suspended, sick with luxury. Daddy had unrolled his window a crack, and in the warm, wet night, the forest exhaled a sweet-smelling green essence that counteracted my nausea. I inhaled shallow drafts through my nose, sing-songing “Impala, Impala,” under my breath, trying to distract myself from vomiting. The fresh air and the repeated word worked like a magic incantation. I began to feel better.

“Shit!” Daddy exclaimed.

“Slow down!” said my mother.

The tires spun sideways, churning up slick mud, spurting gravel sloppily against the underbelly of the car. It seemed like we were stuck, but Daddy slid out of it, laughing, controlling the steering wheel with one hand, keeping one foot pressed on the gas. He was wearing a black nylon shirt with the left sleeve flipped up over a crumpled pack of Winstons. There was a half-empty bottle of amber-colored apple jack between his thighs, and his bare feet were thrust into the black leather penny-loafers he always wore. My mother, sitting

upright on the red-and-white front seat, wearing her green-flowered housedress and old white cardigan, pushed both hands against the red dashboard and stomped the floor, pressing an imaginary brake, while Daddy gunned the engine.

The back end of the Impala fishtailed again, swerving alarmingly close to the drop-off edge. When we veered to the other side, wet branches smacked the windows and dragged the roof.

“Good God, Mervin. *Please*. You’ll kill us all!”

“Shut up,” said Daddy. “Don’t tell me how to drive.”

He spoke in a flat tone I called *snake voice*.

“Blondie!” he exclaimed, turning his attention to me. “What’re you doing back there? Not puking, I hope.”

“Open your eyes,” added my mother. “Closing them makes you sicker.”

I opened my eyes.

Daddy was ducking to look in the rear-view mirror, smoothing back his black hair with one hand, staring steadily at my reflection. I imagined the Devil looked something like Daddy, with long sideburns, backswept hair, and a pointed widow’s peak right in the middle of his forehead. In the mirror, I saw the blur of my face next to Daddy’s, and the image scared me so much I averted my eyes. I didn’t like the way he was always looking at me.

“All right,” he said. “Now let’s drive like hell.”

He smacked my mother’s knee, ground out his cigarette in the wide silver ashtray, and took a swig from the liquor bottle.

“I love you, Barbara,” he said.

He said her name like “Bob-ra.”

She leaned back, touching her hair where the ends flipped up, pulling the round collar on her flowered dress around her neck. She looked out the window.

Daddy frowned.

“I got this car for you. Don’t that prove how much I love you?”

“Where *did* you get this car?” my mother asked sharply.

“Down at my brother Everett’s garage.”

He said the word like “grawdge.”

“Who does it belong to?”

“You know the guy’at bought the Jewett place, that lawyer?”

He said the word like “liar.”

“Good God, Mervin! You won’t get away with it this time. The sheriff’s probably looking for you right now. No wonder you’re speeding. Oh, let me out this minute!”

My mother’s voice was rose higher and higher. She began to snap the latch on her pocket-book open and shut, open and shut.

“Honey, don’t you worry. They can’t find me when I’m gone. And you don’t know *nothing* about cars! This here’s a three forty-eight with ram jet, only fifty-sixty of these babies ever made.”

I had no idea what these words meant, but Daddy always talked about cars this way, naming parts and functions I couldn’t understand.

“Forget horsepower,” he was saying. “We got rocket power! Once I get over the state line, I know a guy can sell this car for a lot of money. Or maybe I’ll just keep it. Don’t you

want a nice car?”

“But I couldn’t drive it anywhere!”

“Jesus H. Christ! Why’nt you try’n appreciate what I do for you?”

“But it’s wrong to steal!”

My mother always tried to have the last word, because she knew everything, and besides, she was smarter than Daddy. Daddy didn’t like smart people. He bragged about quitting school after eighth grade, and he sometimes made fun of my mother about her books, especially when she was reading by herself. But at night he put his head in her lap, and she stroked his hair while reading aloud to him from the Bible, or *Lord Jim*, or from articles in flimsy magazines about unidentified flying objects and alien abductions, or women who went crazy with love. These stories made them murmur and laugh together, and sometimes I wasn’t allowed to listen. The things they read were a secret my mother and Daddy shared.

My mother had told me that in her heart, she was already married to Daddy. The silky blue dress hanging in the narrow trailer-closet was the one she was going to wear to their wedding. All she had to do was not get him mad before it happened.

“It’s only ‘wrong to steal’ if you get caught,” Daddy was saying, mocking my mother by mimicking her.

Daddy always came up with new ways to argue, so my mother never really got the last word.

“Besides, what’s so bad about it? That bastard’s rich. City slicker! Coming up here and buying that place, when he knew damn well my folks was trying to get it ahold of it for years. Isn’t that the same as stealing? And I didn’t steal his car. I just borrowed it.”

Listening in the back seat, I sided first with my mother and then with Daddy. I knew stealing was wrong, because I had heard Grandpa say so during one of his fights with my mother about Daddy. Stealing was taking something that didn't belong to you; it was a crime and also a sin. If you stole, Sheriff James and Deputy Hefferman would come looking for you in their black-and-white car, and take you away in handcuffs. Or, if you didn't get caught, when you died, God might send you to hell.

I knew all that.

But earlier in the evening, when Daddy sailed into the muddy yard of our house trailer, the Impala was so beautiful that even though it was dusk, and I was already in my pajamas, my mother and I went flying out the door, laughing excitedly and asking questions. The car was a red rocket, with jet-silver spears of chrome trim blazing down the long, low sides. In front, the curved red hood resembled the wide-nostrilled snout of a beast, with a silver grill in front bared like shining teeth. Behind, the pointed tail fins tucked into the trunk resembled the graceful, half-folded legs of leaping impala I had seen in National Geographic magazines at my grandparents' house. My mother and I walked all around the car, exclaiming in awe, while Daddy kept saying, "Get in, get in."

He was already drunk, half-truculent, half-gleeful, brushing away my mother's protests with a grab at her sweater and a pinch at her rear.

He pinched my bottom, too.

Laughing, my mother and I entered the red-and-white interior reverently. I clambered into the cocoon of the back seat, while my mother slid all the way over to snuggle next to Daddy. He checked the rearview mirror and turned silver knobs on the dashboard, then

whirled us away, just like that.

Now we were deep in the mountains, going nowhere fast.

I really wanted to believe in Daddy; that he was telling the truth when he said he'd only borrowed the Impala. He often borrowed cars from Uncle Everett's garage, and he always returned them after what he called "joyriding." And what about the city slicker who had taken the Jewett land Daddy's parents wanted to buy? I was always weighing and measuring. Deciding Daddy was not guilty, I settled back in the seat, determined to enjoy the ride.

Daddy was still talking.

"All right, then. An eye for an eye. He took the Jewett place, so I took his car. Now we're even. Don't that make sense?"

Daddy was always weighing and measuring, too: his way of trying not to get caught.

"I guess so." My mother's tone sounded doubtful.

"See?" said Daddy.

I think that was the last word.

He tipped up the liquor bottle, letting a large amount gurgle into his mouth before swallowing. He passed the bottle to my mother. She put it to her lips, wrinkled her nose, took a tiny sip.

"One more," Daddy said. "An apple a day keeps the doctor away."

They both laughed.

My mother took another sip. Drinking was another thing she'd fought with my grandfather about, another secret she'd warned me to keep.

“Now, honey, look out there. Ain’t it pretty?”

Daddy rolled down his window and waved one arm. His voice was boastful, as if he had personally arranged the view, like God.

We were on a level stretch of ridge road running along the mountaintop, with timber and meadows on both sides. The humps of the green hills stretched blackly into the distance, undulating through the low-hanging mist like the backs of sea monsters. The rain clouds had passed over, and the high, clear sky was full of stars. Leaning forward, I rested my chin on the back of the front seat, between Daddy and my mother. Daddy was fondling my mother’s knee. His forearm was marked with an enigmatic blue tattoo, and a thick scar knotted the back of his brown wrist. Daddy’s hands were smooth and hairless on the back, rough and calloused in the palms and fingertips. His fingers were short, thick, and powerful, and I knew how much they could hurt, because when he tickled me, it was too hard.

My mother put her hand over Daddy’s, drawing in a deep breath.

“Just beautiful! What a night for a drive,” she said.

“Let’s open her up” said Daddy. “See what she can do.”

He gripped the steering wheel with both hands and pressed the gas pedal with his black-loafered foot. The car shot forward.

“Go, Daddy!” I said.

I hung over the seat in excitement as he lay back behind the steering wheel and straightened his right leg. The speedometer’s long, thin red needle swept up through slanting numerals: 70, 80, 90.

Daddy grinned at me over his shoulder.

My mother said, "Now, Mervin, don't act foolish. And *you* sit back, before you go through the windshield!"

I sat back, letting the cool night air streaming in through the window blow against my face. Trees and pastures flew by as we raced along. My mother was a scaredy-cat who worried about everything and never drove fast. Once, when Daddy had borrowed one of the cars from his brother's garage, he took me and my friend Susan joyriding with him. The next day, Susan asked, "Who would you rather ride with, your momma or your daddy?"

"I don't know," I said.

I had never thought about it before. I was thinking *he's not my daddy*, but something kept me from blurting out the words.

"Well," Susan said archly, "I'd rather ride with your daddy. He likes to drive fast. He's more fun."

It seemed disloyal to my mother to like Daddy's driving better, but what Susan said was true: he *was* more fun.

I leaned forward again to watch the speedometer. Daddy took another drink from the bottle and passed it to my mother. She shook her head. Then he passed it to me, but my mother said no. Daddy just grinned and let me have it.

I took a small sip of the dark liquid: it was like cider, but more fiery. The swallow took my breath away. I took a bigger sip. Daddy grabbed the bottle back, laughing, and took another long swig, driving with one hand. We were going fast, but it seemed like we were standing still, the car flew so smoothly. He let me have another sip, while my mother warned *she'll get sick!* I laughed, because I had never felt so well. The fire in my chest and belly

burned upward into my cheeks, and even the blonde hair blowing around my face seemed ablaze. Daddy was burning up, too. I could feel heat radiating from the back of his neck.

Then we left the highway again, hitting a dirt road with a sailing thump as Daddy veered off on one of his unexplained short cuts through the woods. Penetrating the dark forest on a strong beam of light, plunging downward through a narrow tunnel of trees on a rapidly unrolling ribbon of road, steering with one hand, Daddy punched in the silver cigarette lighter on the dashboard, shaking a Winston out of his pack, putting it into his mouth. He leaned forward to fiddle with the radio dial.

“ ‘I keep a close watch on this heart of mine; I keep my eyes wide open all the time,’ ” Daddy sang with the fading, statick-y music, touching the glowing red end of the lighter to the tip of his cigarette. The cigarette wagged between Daddy’s lips. Daddy was a good singer. He always sang when he got drunk.

“Look out!” my mother screamed suddenly.

There was a jolting crunch. A dark figure cart-wheeled over the Impala’s hood. I shot forward, my forehead slamming into the dashboard. Beside me, my mother’s face hit the windshield and blood spurted from her nose. Glass shattered all over the back of my neck. The car slewed sideways while Daddy wrestled with the steering wheel.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he shouted.

The world spun around and came to a stop.

When I came to, the door on Daddy’s side was wide open, the seat where he had been sitting empty. I couldn’t see anything through the windshield because the glass was all

cracked around a big hole. My mother was moaning beside me. I took one look at her face and didn't look again because the red mess between her eyes and nose made me dizzy. Something warm and sticky was trickling into my eyes, so I scratched my wet, throbbing forehead. Without looking at my fingers, I wiped them on the seat, then grabbed the steering wheel and pulled myself out. I fell down on the ground because my legs were like jelly, then got up again.

The dark woods were eerily silent. A shroud of stillness muffled my hearing. It seemed as if I could hear the echoes of crashes and screams all around me, but it was my ears that were ringing. The mountain air had turned cold, and I began to shiver uncontrollably. My thin pajamas were damp with a dark stain I knew was blood, and the sharp smell of pine knifing up my nostrils made my eyeballs ache. I took a shallow swallow of air around the pain in my chest. Where was Daddy?

Scrambling up barefoot through cool, wet ferns and rocky mud onto the dirt road, I saw that the Impala was backwards in the ditch, its silver grill smashed in, the headlight on my mother's side black. The other headlight cast a cockeyed beam uphill, across the road, where I suddenly saw Daddy squatting beside a dark lump. He looked up and caught sight of me.

"Come here, Blondie," he called.

Hugging myself, I crossed over.

Daddy hunkered on the roadside, balanced on his loafers, one hand on the large animal that had gone flying over the hood when we crashed. He motioned at me to come closer.

The deer lay on one side with its neck outstretched, its curling black tongue thrust forward in a pant. Its ribs were rising and falling as its hind legs churned the gravel and mud. Moist black nostrils flared with the effort of getting breath. I was startled beyond words when the deer's two large, glistening eyes met mine in an expression of strained, helpless anguish. Tears burned into my eyelids. Looking away quickly, I squatted beside Daddy, shivering, leaning against him because he was on fire, as always. Daddy hugged me, baring his teeth in a grin, black eyes lost in the darkness of his face. He smelled powerfully of jack whiskey and a sharp, unidentified tang that made my throat ache.

"Daddy," I said.

"You're all right," he said. "So's your mother. She's just a little shook up. But this deer ain't going to make it. Lookit this!"

He put both hands under the deer's belly and grabbed something. I leaned forward to see what he was doing. Two long, stiff nipples protruded from Daddy's fists. He lifted up with both hands, and a silky, swollen bag shot through with delicate blue veins came into the light.

"Doe," Daddy said. "Somewhere in the woods is a fawn whose mama ain't coming home. Two, by the looks of it."

Something hot twisted in my chest. My head was pounding.

"Look," said Daddy again.

He squeezed the one of the doe's teats tightly in his fist, and then drew it out firmly. A pearly drop formed on the end and burst. The milk flowed down Daddy's fingers in a thin trickle.

"No sense letting it go to waste," he said, licking his hand. "Go get your cup."

I ran back to the car. My mother was sitting up in the front seat with her eyes open, dabbing carefully at her face with a bloodied handkerchief. She watched me silently while I rummaged through her pocket-book for the collapsible silver cup she always carried.

"Daddy wants my cup," I said.

"All right," my mother said. "I'm just going to sit here."

She sounded perfectly calm and almost cheerful. There was blood all over her face and down the front of her dress, but she seemed all right. Yet when she looked at me, her eyes were so docile, I knew she didn't even see me. She didn't understand anything. She thought Daddy was taking care of me now.

When I got back across the road, the doe's ribs were still moving. Her legs were slender, her dainty hoofs perfectly formed as petals, her large, long-lashed brown eyes rimmed in black as beautiful as any woman's. Daddy took the cup and began drawing spurts of milk into it, working the long teats knowingly with hard, insistent fingers. I looked away and suffered with the doe as she panted and jerked in resistance. I felt horribly self-conscious, as if we were doing something wrong, or not doing what I knew to be right. I couldn't look at the doe, but Daddy seemed unsurprised by her struggles. He leaned forward to press one knee into her flank as he finished her off.

Then he stood up and handed me the cup, half-full of thin, pungent liquid.

Brushing off his hands, Daddy said, "Get ready to drink that when I tell you."

"Drink it?" I said doubtfully.

"It's good for you. It'll put hair on your chest. Hold on a minute, though."

He gave me a sharp look.

"I have to put this doe out of her misery. It ain't right letting her suffer. And killing's not pretty, so maybe you want to get on back across the road."

He said it like a challenge.

"No." I shook my head.

I didn't like the way Daddy was looking at me, but right then, I only wanted to be next to him and his warmth, not in the wrecked Impala with my unconsciously conscious mother.

"I'm staying right here," I said firmly.

"All right, then," said Daddy.

He could be the most reasonable of men sometimes.

He wiped his hands on his black slacks. He lifted the bottom of his shirt, revealing a leather sheath tucked into his waistband, drawing out the big knife he kept hidden there. He knelt and pulled the doe's head back with one hand. Her long throat curved forward, pulsing as she strained for breath. Her back legs kicked feebly in the dirt.

"You can touch her if you want," said Daddy, acting like he owned the deer.

I squatted down, balancing the cup of milk.

I was as afraid of the doe as she was of me, but when I stretched out my hand to touch her, she stopped moving. One long ear flicked back in my direction. I slid my fingers down her soft, smooth neck, patting her shoulder. I tried to catch the doe's eye again, but she gazed resolutely into the distance, as if waiting for something. I stroked her again, and she let me. I wondered if she was thinking of her babies, lost in the woods. I started to cry.

"All right, then," growled Daddy. "That's enough."

I got up to step into the shadow of the trees. I didn't want to see what Daddy was going to do, but I couldn't help looking back.

Daddy straddled the doe and took her muzzle in one hand. He laid the edge of the blade against the underside of her jaw, running it lightly from side to side. A dark line of blood welled up. A swift slash, then a harsh, bubbling squeal came from the deer. Her back legs kicked strongly and a foul odor rose from her body.

"Hah!" said Daddy.

He grimaced and pulled back hard on the doe's jaw. Blood gushed from the gash in her throat, and soon Daddy's hands were all slippery-wet. Finally, the roadside was stained with a large, dark pool. Letting go, Daddy stood up.

"Now drink!" he said.

I raised the cup to my lips, tipping the contents into my mouth. The liquid slid down my throat and I swallowed convulsively, nearly gagging. The milk's strong, rank smell and taste was so bad, for a moment I couldn't catch my breath. I thought I might vomit. I looked at Daddy with tears in my eyes, humiliated by my own weakness.

"Good," he said. "You're brave. When you get back home, you can tell all your friends you drank deer's milk. No one else has, I bet."

"Nope," I gasped.

I thought of Susan, and a few other girls and boys I knew in the village. I could lord this over them, if I wanted to. I sucked in some air and swallowed again around the milky film in the back of my throat. The thick animal aftertaste was sharp, sweet, and green, like the mountain meadows on a hot summer day. I tried to imagine how I would describe that taste to

my friends.

Daddy was watching me closely.

“Waste not, want not,” he said. “Don’t you feel better already?”

I nodded. I did feel better. The gulp of milk had cleared the pressure out of my chest, and my head had stopped aching.

“All right, then. Go see how your mother’s doing. I’ve got some more business here.”

Daddy shoved the knife under his shirt and bent over. He grabbed the deer’s hind legs and gave a jerk. The scrape of her carcass against the road sounded sickeningly like a body being dragged over rough rocks.

“What are you going to do, Daddy?” I asked.

He just gave me a hard look, pointing his chin at the car. I slapped the collapsible cup into a flat silver disc, and ran leaping back across the road to where my mother was waiting in the Impala.

I was dozing in the front seat when dawn started to lighten the sky. Opening my eyes reluctantly, I saw that the red interior of the car was a cold wreck, with dried blood and shattered glass on every surface. My whole body was stiff and painful. Trying not to wake my mother, who was sleeping under the car blanket, I pushed open the door on Daddy’s side and slid out. The woods were quiet, except for a few birds chirping. A morning mist hung over everything. Scrambling up out of the ditch, I found Daddy squatting in the middle of the dirt road, smoking a cigarette, rolling an empty liquor bottle around and around, waiting for someone or something.

"Blondie," he said, looking up, his voice tranquil.

I recognized his transition from drunkenness to wrung-out stupor. He had probably not slept at all that night. His handsome face was filthy, his dark clothing stiff with what I knew was blood.

"Daddy?" I asked.

I knew it was him, but I wasn't sure, because I had never seen him looking so dirty and exhausted. I squatted next to him.

He put his arm around me and passed me his cigarette. The butt was wet from his lip, the long ash acrid. I took a puff and passed it back. We smoked and watched the air grow light in the treetops, while birds clamored excitedly in the branches. It was still cold, but soon the sun would warm everything, and the deep forest would become a buzzing engine of life. Down on the White River flats, it would be hot. It would be a great day for swimming in the old swimming hole, or tree-climbing, or woods-crawling. I tried to imagine myself in a few hours, splashing with my friends in the shallows of the river, where it wound alongside Route 100 through the valley. Life down there seemed very far away from this mountaintop. I wonder if seemed even farther to Daddy. I leaned against him while he lit another cigarette.

Then the black-and-white car appeared, crawling cautiously down the steep road with the red light on the roof silently revolving as it came to a stop. Sheriff James and Deputy Hefferman got out with their guns drawn.

Daddy shook me off, stood up, and said calmly, "Well, hello, gentlemen, fancy running into you up here."

His voice was soft and lazy.

"Breton, you goddamn wild Indian! You wrecked that beautiful car," said Hefferman explosively, stamping his foot. Hefferman was the same age as Daddy, friends with everyone in town.

"I know it," said Daddy. "It's a crying shame, innit?"

"Where's the deer?" asked Sheriff James. He was older, gray-haired, a constant presence in our lives, someone I compared to either Santa Claus or Jesus. "What happened to the deer, Breton?"

"Oh, she got up and ran off."

"Ran off!"

"Probably laying dead in the woods somewhere." Daddy coolly flicked his half-smoked cigarette down the road.

"Huh!" said Sheriff James.

Hefferman shook his head, shoved his gun into its holster, and took the handcuffs off his belt. Smiling, Daddy put his arms behind himself with exaggerated politeness, first one, then the other, holding his head held high while Hefferman clicked the silver bracelets into place.

Sheriff James slid down the ditch to help my mother out of the Impala. He boosted her scrambling up to the roadside, holding her hand. Then he beckoned, and I scurried over. He walked us to the black-and-white and helped my mother into the back seat. I got in beside her. We sat and waited while Sheriff James took Daddy by the arm and led him a short way off. I couldn't hear what Daddy was saying, but it was the kind of argument he always had. Soon the sheriff gave up and let Hefferman lead Daddy back over to us. My mother unrolled

the window.

"I'll wait here with Hefferman," Daddy said. "You let the sheriff take you on home."

His arms were behind him, one curling lock of black hair falling down over his blood-streaked, unshaven face. His thin shirt was stiff with filth, his smooth, hairless forearms goose-pimpled with cold. Even dirty and exhausted, lacking his usual fire, he was impossibly handsome. Daddy shivered, moving his shoulders restlessly against the constraining cuffs. He ducked down to peer through the car window into my mother's eyes.

"I'm sorry, honey."

"I know," she said.

She sounded very tired. Her white face was blood-smeared, too.

I leaned over her lap for one last look at the place where Daddy had bled the deer to death. Sheriff James squatted there, studying the dark stain. He flipped open his metal notebook and wrote something on the page with a ballpoint pen. Then he looked at the wrecked Impala, and wrote again. Deputy Hefferman put his cigarette to Daddy's lips and let him take a deep drag.

"Ran off?" said Hefferman.

"Yup," said Daddy.

He blew out a cloud of smoke, looking over Hefferman's head high into the pointed treetops at the slit of sky above that was turning blue. The mountains get cold, even in June, and Daddy hunched his shoulders miserably, as if by making himself smaller, he could get warm somehow. I was cold, too, but my mother put her arm around me. I leaned against her as she sat there, sniffing. Finally Sheriff James flipped his metal notebook shut, stood up, got

in, and started the engine. Suddenly Daddy ducked again and grinned at me through the car window.

“Blondie can tell you. She saw the whole thing. Right? Tell the deputy what happened to the deer.”

He said the word like “dep-itty.”

“She ran off,” I said eagerly. “She was flying. She just disappeared.”

Daddy and Hefferman both laughed.

Another secret.

He was not my father, but somehow he got inside me.

Sheriff James put the car in gear. He waved, and Hefferman waved back. Daddy started to jog in place like he was going to take off running, and when we pulled away from the roadside, he fell in at a sprint behind us, dashing tiptoe in his loafers up the muddy hill through the rocky rivulets running with rainwater, swinging his captive shoulders against the cuffs like a prize-fighter in the dawn. He was smiling, while behind him, Hefferman was pulling out his gun.

“Id-jit,” snorted Sheriff James, stepping firmly on the gas.

“Mervin!” My mother started to cry.

“Go, Daddy!” I said.

Watching through the rear window of the sheriff’s car, I saw Daddy drop back, but I might have heard him calling as we crested the rise, “See you later, Blondie!”

And for a moment, before the tunnel of trees swallowed him up completely, Daddy hung there, dancing.

Deep, Fleeting Forest

“Sugar. In. The. Crankcase,” my mother said to me, pronouncing each word slowly and separately, as if I were being stupid on purpose.

Her dark eyes were wide-open and glistening, staring at me meaningfully, with just a hint of threat. Her wavy brown hair was disarranged, hanging in sticky wisps over the collar of her dirty white blouse. On the front of her blouse, over the nipple of each breast, was a round, stiff stain. Her body emitted a skunk-y odor of sweat, unwashed hair, and sour milk. My baby brother was wailing in the crib upstairs; Lee-Jay was no longer brand-new, but still small and colicky. He cried constantly. My other brothers were in the house, too, hiding like wild creatures under the beds in the bedroom they shared. While my mother talked in that breathless, emphatic way of hers, I pictured them cowering amongst the dust bunnies, J.R. sniveling, two fingers of his left hand upside-down in his mouth, Stephen pushing his lower lip out, tears trembling on his pink eyelids. This image of my younger brothers infuriated me. Distracted by their unseen force of their fear, I couldn't focus on what my mother was saying.

Her words added up to a sentence, but it meant nothing to me.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It'll ruin the engine. Then the car won't run!”

“All right,” I said. “But then how will we leave if the car’s broke down?”

“Shut your smart mouth,” my mother shouted suddenly. “Don’t ask so many questions! I can’t take it anymore!”

Her face was white, except for the two blotches of red that spread up either side, from neck to temples.

I knew not to say another word.

My mother pulled and twisted at the hem of her blouse where it hung over the waistband of her blue skirt. A large safety pin held the opening of the skirt together. The zipper was down, and I could see her white slip underneath. Her bulging stomach had not seemed so noticeable when she was pregnant with Lee-Jay, but now it was loose as an empty balloon. Her restless hands were itching to slap me.

“And don’t tell anyone anything,” she added. “It’s a secret!”

I nodded.

I was good at keeping secrets; she knew that.

We went out into the driveway where a white automobile was parked that Daddy had shown up in a few weeks earlier.

It was probably stolen.

The car was long and wide, with a convertible top that Daddy had put up and down a few times to impress my mother. The paint was creamy-white, unmarred by rust, shining in the morning sun. None of us kids had been allowed to get into the car; the days when Daddy liked to drive us around for fun were long gone. No more joyriding. Now he was almost always mean when drunk, which was most of the time. He despised criers, vomiters, whiners,

and back-talkers, which covered Lee-Jay, J.R., Stephen, and me. He also hated goody-two-shoes, like my mother, who had joined a new church and was teaching us to pray.

I wanted to ask her where Daddy was, but one of the neighbors had come over at dawn to summon her to their telephone, so he was probably in jail.

Again.

My mother was at the hood of the car, trying to lift it up.

“Come on,” she said impatiently. “Stop dawdling! You’ve got to help me!”

Sharp, black coal fragments littering the driveway near the cellar chute cut into the bottoms of my feet, but I had developed a way of gliding over the ground barefoot that kept me from feeling any pain. I went around to the front of the car where my mother was struggling. It was early morning, but the sun was already intense, and the car radiated heat. My mother’s body odor was growing stronger, and now there was something else in it, too.

I am an animal, I thought. I can smell her fear.

On the nose of the car’s long hood was a gold crown with a wreath of silver leaves encircling it. The wreath looked like the laurels worn by Greek scholars in the books about ancient history I was obsessed with. My mother had her hand under the emblem, working at an unseen lever. Finally, she began to heave up on the huge hood that covered the engine.

“Help,” she gasped. “Don’t just stand there!”

I scurried over and pushed up on the hood, too. Finally, we had it open, propped up with a long metal rod. My mother leaned way over, and started energetically moving her arm, unscrewing something.

“Sugar,” she said. “Now!”

I ran back into the house.

In the kitchen was a tall cupboard where the sugar and flour were kept. I dragged a wooden kitchen chair over, stood on it, and reached up. The sugar was in a round metal canister with a tight-fitting lid, decorated with a wooden ball for a handle. The word "SUGAR" was stamped into the metal in black letters. I got down, holding the canister in one arm, afraid of dropping it on the floor.

Afraid of my mother's fury.

Sometimes I was so clumsy I couldn't even believe it myself, but there were days when my body seemed to belong to someone else, and this was one of them.

Lee-Jay was still crying, a monotonous, exhausted screeching that set my teeth on edge, and made me want to strangle him, just to shut him up.

Immediately, I felt guilty.

"Stephen," I hollered. "Go see what the baby wants."

Silence.

All three boys seemed to be holding their breath, listening.

"Now!" I thundered.

A scurrying of footsteps to the room where Lee-Jay lay in his crib beside the bed Daddy and my mother shared. I heard Stephen's high, tremulous voice asking, "What, baby? What do you want?"

Another wail from Lee-Jay.

Then one from J.R..

I put the sugar canister down on the counter and left the kitchen.

“No crying!” I shouted up the stairs, stamping my foot. “Or I’ll come up there and give you all a good reason to cry!”

“Di-aaana!” My mother yelled from the driveway.

I whirled around and went flying out the door, forgetting all about the sugar.

Sure enough, she slapped me. I ran back into the house for the canister.

It took the two of us only a few minutes to get the sugar in the crankcase, using the big silver funnel my mother had brought from the kitchen, but I still didn’t understand why we were doing what we did.

Later that morning, I sat cross-legged on the floor of the boys’ bedroom, flipping through one of the magazines my grandparents had brought when they showed up unexpectedly in their green truck outfitted with a home-built camper on the back. It was parked behind Daddy’s white car, which now contained sugar somewhere under the hood. The green-and-white Vermont license plate on the back of Grandpa’s truck made me feel happy, but I was startled to see my grandparents, because it was the first time they’d ever visited us at the house in western Massachusetts where we’d been living with Daddy for five years.

I knew why my grandparents never came to see us: they hated Daddy, who was not my real father, nor Stephen’s, though he was the father of J.R. and Lee-Jay.

When they arrived, my grandmother hugged and kissed each of us. She was soft and smelled of doughnut grease and baby powder. That was because she fried up a batch of doughnuts every Monday morning on the farm, and once I had seen her lifting her big, baggy breasts to powder the red skin underneath. My grandfather, tall, gray-haired, and long-faced,

shook my hand and Stephen's, but he ignored five-year-old J.R., who was clinging to my mother's legs with his fingers in his mouth. Grandma took Lee-Jay and settled him against her soft bosom. Miraculously, he stopped crying.

Then my mother sent the rest of us upstairs to wait while she talked to her parents in the kitchen.

I was eavesdropping from the open door of my brothers' bedroom, paging through the stack of magazines, while my brothers lay together silently on Stephen's bed. As long as we were all quiet, my mother would never know we were listening.

"I got you a car," said Grandpa. "It's parked up at Fort Dummer."

I knew the place. It was a forest just over the border, in Vermont. In the summer, when we drove north to Rochester to spend our school vacation at my grandparents' farm, we often stopped there to eat a sandwich and stretch our legs.

"Oh, Barbara, have you thought this through?" asked my grandmother. "Another divorce? Is this what you really want? Your life will be ruined!"

I heard Lee-Jay squawking, and there was a pause while the women fussed over him.

"I have to do it," said my mother finally. Her voice sounded strained and desperate. "You don't understand. He's going to kill me if I don't get away from him. And now he's started saying things about Diana—"

"Oh, horse feathers," snorted Grandpa. "You're exaggerating. What are you talking about?"

I was surprised to hear my name.

But I knew what my mother was talking about. It was the hand under my shirt when

he thought no one was looking, that hard thing in his pants when he made me sit on his lap.

“What have you told the children?” Grandma never used slang; she never called us kids.

“Nothing,” said my mother. “Why should I tell them anything? They don’t need to know.”

“What are they talking about?” Stephen whispered.

“Shut up,” I hissed. “I can’t hear what they’re saying!”

Stephen was one year younger, a blonde, green-eyed replica of myself, so close to me in looks and size that people often mistook us for twins. I hated that. I didn’t want to be like him, because I thought he was a sissy. Stephen cried easily and was painfully shy. I called him “Princess” because he was soft-hearted and noble-looking, with a long, straight nose and sweeping eyelashes.

In turn, he called me “Dino,” which was a boy’s name; the nickname of a man who was a singer; the name of a clumsy dinosaur on a popular cartoon show.

My brother’s name for me reflected my almost complete lack of grace and girlishness.

“Let’s eat something,” my grandmother was saying. “You need to eat. You’ve got this baby to think of. He doesn’t look like he’s thriving.”

Dishes started rattling in the sink and my mother’s reply was indistinguishable as the women set about making food.

It was around noon, but the bedroom was still cool, because the huge old maple tree growing on the west side of the house shaded it completely. A breeze rustled the green leaves, stirring the white curtains. When I looked up again from the magazine at my brothers,

J.R. had dozed off with his big, round head on Stephen's arm. Stephen's eyes were open, staring up at the cracks in the white plaster ceiling.

I looked back down at the magazine in my lap.

The article I was reading was about hippies.

I'd never heard the word before, but from the article, I learned that the year before, there had been hippies at something called the Summer of Love in San Francisco, which was in California, which was almost as far away from Vermont and Massachusetts as you could get, and still be in America. I had heard a song on the radio that had a line in it about going to San Francisco with flowers in your hair.

The hippies in the article, like the ones who had this summer of love, were young men and women with long hair held back by headbands that made them look like pale-skinned Indians. Some of them had flowers in their hair. They wore soft skirts, or loose-fitting, faded dungarees, and colorful, gauzy shirts. Around their necks were long strings of colored beads. Many of them were barefoot.

Studying the photographs intently, I contrasted the hippies with my mother and Daddy, who were about the same age. My mother was angular and gaunt, except for her thick waist. Her dark hair was chopped short, and she wore the same three or four blouses and skirts day in and day out. She never wore pants, because Daddy wouldn't let her.

Daddy was shorter than my mother, with muscular arms, shoulders, and thighs. His oily black hair was swept up in front, and waved in back in what my mother called a D.A., which stood for duck's ass. He had high cheekbones, narrow eyes, and full, down-turned lips. He never wore dungarees, always dressing in tight-fitting slacks and silky shirts that were

invariably black. And I had never seen him go barefoot; he always slipped his feet small, brown feet into black penny loafers without socks.

I had heard my mother tell one of her friends that Daddy looked like Elvis Presley because he was part Indian, too, just like Elvis.

But these hippies looked like angels, or visitors from another planet.

I'm going be one of them when I grow up, I decided. Live for peace and love. Not like my mother. Not like Daddy.

The smell of food rose in the air, the only kind of food I had ever eaten: meat, potatoes, stewed vegetables, milk. The clink of dishes and the shuffle of soft footsteps across linoleum disturbed my dream of California.

"Where's the television set I gave you?" I heard my grandfather rumble. "What happened to it? Did that son-of-a-gun pawn it?"

"No, no," my mother replied. "Dad, don't ask questions. It's too late for that."

I knew what had happened to the television set.

A couple months earlier, a famous man named Martin Luther King had been murdered. We had been watching his funeral on the television when Daddy came home, drunk.

"Fuckin' nigger," he growled, leaning in the doorway with his arms folded across his chest.

"Now, Mervin," said my mother in a careful tone of voice.

She was holding Lee-Jay on her lap, nursing him. He was still practically newborn, tiny and red-faced, furiously fussy all the time.

Daddy had been staying away for days on end. Sometimes when he did come home, like now, he reeked of strong perfume over the alcohol on his breath. I had heard my mother tell Betty Pielock next door that he had a girlfriend, but when she said it, she looked so crazy, I doubted her.

What I didn't doubt was that something was seriously wrong between my mother and Daddy.

I had been curled up on the other end of the couch, reading a novel far beyond my comprehension, while my mother watched the funeral of Martin Luther King on television. My brothers were in their bedroom upstairs, playing a boys' game with Matchbox cars and trucks.

Everything had been peaceful until Daddy came in.

I tried to make myself invisible.

"Oh, great," said Daddy to my mother. "You love him, right? I'll bet you'd like to suck his big, black cock. Too bad he's dead. Too bad someone felt the need to 'sassinate the sumbitch."

"Diana," said my mother.

She pulled Lee-Jay away from her breast and handed him to me.

Lee-Jay squealed in protest.

"Hey, Blondie," said Daddy, noticing me for the first time. "You wanna suck dick, too? Here's mine!"

He started to fumble at his belt buckle, grinning wolfishly at me.

I said nothing. I simply let my book drop to the floor, and took my baby brother from

my mother. I walked as quietly as I could to the stairs, and then fled upward, praying I wouldn't drop the squirming, crying infant. I headed for my brothers' bedroom. Behind me, I heard a sudden, startling crash, the rattling shatter of broken glass, the popping buzz of plugged-in destruction. My mother began to scream and scream, the way she did when he grabbed her hair and banged her head on the floor.

No more television, I thought desolately.

Now Stephen's eyes flicked over to me.

"What are they saying?" he whispered again.

"Aliens landed on Earth, and they're coming to get you," I replied.

"Liar!"

"If you're so curious, why don't you come over here and listen yourself?"

"Mean-o Dino!"

"That's so funny, I forgot to laugh."

"Children!" It was my grandmother's voice calling up the stairs. "Wash your hands. Time to eat!"

By the time we got over the border into Vermont, it was evening. When we found the car parked in the woods at Dummer, we crawled out of Grandpa's camper in a stupor of exhaust fumes and tiredness. The woods smelled fresh and green. Drawing in deep breaths, I began to swing my arms, as my grandfather was doing. The car we had been looking for was small and brown, with four doors and a funny rear-end that looked like it was too short. I was used to the big automobiles with long tail fins that Daddy always drove.

"Sixty-two Rambler," Grandpa was saying to my mother. "Runs good. You owe me four hundred dollars, don't forget. Money doesn't grow on trees, you know!"

"I won't forget, Dad."

My mother's voice sounded completely dead. She had Lee-Jay over one shoulder, and he was spitting up again. Automatically, I reached up to wipe his mouth with the long cloth diaper hanging down my mother's back.

I was surprised when Lee-Jay gave me a tiny, tentative smile.

He knows me, I realized. He recognizes my face. I smiled back at him, and his tiny mouth twisted in silent laughter.

"Fort Dummer," my grandfather was saying. "Did you know this was the first place white men lived in Vermont? Just think, before them, before us, nothing but wild Indians in these woods. Suppose any of them were related to you-know-who?"

"Shut up, Dad," said my mother. "Kids, stretch your legs. Run around. We've got a long drive ahead."

Stephen and J.R. stood there stupidly, rubbing their eyes and sniffing.

"Where are we going?" I asked my mother.

It was a risk. I could tell she was in the kind of mood where she hated to be asked questions.

"I don't know," she replied. "California."

That was where her brother, David, lived. It was also the place for hippies.

I grinned.

"You'll never make it to California," said my grandfather. "How will you pay for

gas?"

"Now, George," said my grandmother.

"All right, Dad, Iowa, then."

That was where her sister, Christine, lived.

I frowned. Iowa sounded boring.

"You've got no business saddling Christine with your problems. She's got her hands full with her own family."

"All right, Dad," my mother said again. "Can we drop it? I'm just going to drive west until I die, or the car does. Diana, take the boys out in the woods and find a place to pee."

I sighed.

"Come on," I said, taking J.R.'s hand. I ignored Stephen. I knew he was terrified.

A sandy path led away into the woods. Fallen leaves and pine needles cushioned my bare feet. After only a few feet, the woods forest became gloomy. I began looking for a place to stop. I needed a tree to squat against so I could relieve my bladder.

"Where are we going?" Stephen asked me. His voice was so carefully neutral, I knew he was fighting back tears.

"What d'ya mean? We're going to find a place to pee in the woods."

"No, I mean, where are we going tonight? In that car."

I was surprised. Stephen never seemed to know anything.

"We're running away from Daddy. Going west. Either to California or Iowa."

"Will we ever come back home?"

I considered his question only because I hadn't allowed myself to think about it until

that very moment.

"Not me," I said firmly. "I'm never coming back. I'm going to be a hippie."

Stephen was silent.

We stood there in the middle of the trail, thinking what we'd just said, but neither of us had enough energy to say anything more about what was happening to us.

"I gotta go," whimpered J.R.. He was clutching the front of his blue shorts with his pudgy knees close together.

"Go, then."

Stephen took one step off the trail and turned his back on me. J.R. did the same. Soon the odor of fresh urine rose from the mossy forest floor.

I looked the other way. I had to pee, too, but I wanted to find just the right spot. I was severely allergic to poison ivy, and the summer before, I'd squatted in some, resulting in a rash of large, weeping blisters that spread from my bottom around my waist, up my back, and down my thighs. I'd been unable to sit or lie down comfortably for weeks, and the doctor had come to the house to lance the boils. The right spot to pee in the woods was a place where a single tree without low branches stood in a clearing of grass. I could lean up against it with my pants down and my legs apart, but first I would have to examine it carefully to make sure there was no evil three-leaved vine creeping up the trunk.

"Hurry up!" I told my brothers.

"Done," said Stephen. I turned around. He was pulling at his dungarees, fastening the brown leather belt around his waist.

"Done," said J.R. He said the word like "Thunh," because he already had his fingers

in his mouth.

“Go back, then. I need my privacy.”

“All right,” said Stephen doubtfully.

He took J.R.’s hand and went a few steps down the trail. Then he turned around again.

“What if we get lost in the woods?”

“Got any bread crumbs in your pocket?”

I was referring to that fairy tale about a brother and sister abandoned in the forest by their wood-cutter father. The children drop bread crumbs behind them as their father takes them deeper and deeper into the woods, but when they try to find their way back home, birds have eaten up their trail. I knew Stephen would start crying, because he feared being abandoned in the woods, and always sniffled whenever my mother read the story aloud from a book of that had been left behind in the closet of my bedroom.

Sure enough, Stephen’s face collapsed, and his lower lip went out.

“You won’t get lost!” I exclaimed impatiently. “Just go back the way we came.”

I pointed my finger down the trail.

“See?” I said. “There’s the path. How can you get lost? Just don’t wander off.”

My brothers started trudging away with their heads down, holding hands.

Something hot twisted in my chest.

They looked so helpless without me. I almost ran after them, but I really had to pee.

“Tell Momma I’ll be back in a minute,” I hollered. “Don’t let her leave without me!”

I turned around and started walking deeper into the forest. I practiced walking silently as an animal on my bare feet, concentrating on breathing in and out, slowly and deeply,

willing my heart to a slow rhythm. I am not afraid, I thought.

The pressure in my bladder was distracting, but there was no place to stop.

I started thinking about what my grandfather had said about the first white men in Vermont. Before them, only Indians. Daddy was part Indian, and so were two of my brothers. Maybe I'm part Indian, too, I thought. And Stephen. No one knew much about our father, but my mother had said his real last name was Montoya. Maybe he was an Indian like Daddy. I started to walk on the balls of my feet like I'd seen Indians on television do.

Suddenly, I heard a sharp rustling in a tall tree standing beside the trail.

"Hoo-hoo-hoo," something or someone said.

I stopped in my tracks. The hair on the back of my neck tingled.

I looked upward. On a topmost branch, indistinct against the dark sky, I spied a gray shape, like a small man, hunched over on the branch with his arms folded behind his back.

"Hoo," he said.

It was a bird—a large, gray bird with a deep, throaty voice.

"Jeez," I breathed.

My bladder cramped urgently. I almost wet my pants. I didn't know what to do. I stood there, fighting my body. I wanted to turn around and run. I had to pee. It was getting very dark. But I couldn't move.

"Hoo," the bird enunciated once again, its tone gentle. The sound was almost like a gurgle, with a hint of laughter. A series of cackles followed, and then a string of soft syllables that sounded like, "Who are you, where are you going?"

"Wait," I called up to the bird. "What do you mean?"

The owl jumped off the branch into the sky, flapped its huge wings once or twice.

Then it was gone.

“God,” I said.

I was done looking for a better place to relieve myself. I pulled at the waistband of my red shorts, and right there in the middle of the trail, I squatted down and let the stream fly. A few drops splattered my ankles and insteps, but I didn’t care. When I was done, I yanked my shorts up and took off running back down the trail.

Just then I heard my mother calling, and Stephen yodeling, a special secret call we used to find each other when we were separated in the woods. J.R. and Lee-Jay were clamoring. Even my grandparents were hollering my name. I was not lost. I knew where I was going.

Yodeling back, I burst into the clearing, where they were all waiting for me.

A Place to Stand in All That Water

When Lee-Jay Breton was in prison, he dreamed about getting out and going to Hawaii. He imagined himself in bathing trunks and a short-sleeved shirt with bright red and yellow flowers printed on it. Bare feet. White mother-of-pearl beads on a leather cord around his neck. Sun flaming on the horizon; foam breaking on the beach. A battery-powered radio blasting island reggae beside him, where he sprawled in the sand, tanning his skin, smoking a Marlboro Light. Lee-Jay drowsed on the bunk in his cell, dreaming of Hawaii.

It was after midnight, but Mingo down the row was still awake, banging his fists against the bars in a loud, monotonous rhythm. As Mingo's fury ruptured the dim, pressurized night hum of D wing, someone sleepily called out, "Mingo, it's cool, buddy. Go back to bed." Mingo responded by body-slamming the cage with a rattling crash. The other prisoners up and down the row murmured in unison, shifting simultaneously and rolling over, like combers breaking on the beach. Someone swore loudly. Soon the night guards would come and yell at them all to pipe down. They might even drag Mingo out of his cell with some kind of new, high-tech, less-than-lethal compliance gear, for a lockdown in the hole.

The noise disturbed Lee-Jay's cellmates. Washington in the rack over him began to moan, and the other two stirred restlessly, coughing and snuffling in the half-lit darkness of

their four-man cell. Lee-Jay gritted his teeth and rolled over, punching the mattress in frustration. Hawaii! It was a long way from the Fort.

He closed his eyes and reached for the dream.

Waikiki Beach, near the bronze statue of Duke Kahanamoku, the most famous Hawaiian waterman ever.

The Duke was Christ-like in his sandy grove of palms, with broad hands uplifted as if to bless the Japanese and Australian tourists who gathered around to snap pictures of each other at his feet. Both of his arms were draped with leis of fragrant yellow hibiscus flowers, offerings from those who still worshipped his memory. Propped behind the Duke was a bronze copy of his surfboard, and beyond, the ocean, where half-clad bathers stood ankle-deep in the curling blue surf. The spicy smell of wood smoke and the perfume of flowers drifted on the constant, mild breeze.

Across the street from the statue was the Waikiki Police Station, a cozy, inoffensive bungalow fronted by surfboard racks and tall white flowers in beds of black lava. Cops! On the beach! But to Lee-Jay's way of thinking, this was only a minor annoyance. In Hawaii, he wouldn't break the law, or if he did, he wouldn't get caught. He would live simple, and that would keep him out of trouble. No gambling. No drugs. All he needed was a backpack with a change of underwear and some shorts. Sandals. A book or two. Money. Meds. If the cops bugged him, he could always pick up and move farther on down the beach. It was just too bad that the Duke had to stand there forever, looking at the police station.

A stillness had fallen over D wing and Lee-Jay felt himself slipping toward sleep. The hum of the heating and ventilation equipment sounded through the labyrinth of cells like the

ocean speaking inside a conch shell. Mingo had finally given up, and the murmurous prisoners were sinking into oblivion. Silence rose above the cells like the blue sky over Hawaii. The surf was pounding in Lee-Jay's ears. He was floating in the water, letting the waves lift him, lift him. Over the swells, he glimpsed Duke Kanahamoku swimming toward him, doing the butterfly, latissimus dorsii muscles flaring in the sun like the dark wings of a manta ray. Flying, flying over the water, like some kind of shining man-fish.

Lee-Jay went under.

The night wore on under the sleep of two thousand breathing, dreaming men, locked in tiers of cells behind the high concrete walls of the Fort. The prison stood behind razor wire on top of a rolling hill, surrounded by black prairie that was a barren, windswept expanse, scraped raw and drifted with sculpted waves of frozen snow. In the watchtowers at the four corners, uniformed guards studied crisscrossing patterns of light, scanning the landscape for escaping men. A half-mile away was the county road, empty except for an occasional farm truck, and farther, two lanes of interstate, where beams of light sped northward and southward all night long. The sky above the Iowa countryside was dark at the apex of its vault, but from edge to edge, the horizon glowed with snow-reflected light.

Ferocious blasts of Canadian air drove from the north, howling when they hit the walls of the Fort. The frigid air rendered the prison fragile, as if a good blow might shatter the entire structure into a billion bits of dust and matter. The pulverized prairie, stripped of life, lay under the wind like the flayed hide of a great, humped beast, its stillness intimating disaster. Nothing moved in the fields, but inside the Fort, the men surged all night against the darkness, their voices breaking against the prison walls like seawater on the strand.

When first call came a few hours later, Lee-Jay woke with a groan to the glare of overhead lights, the clang of security doors, and the rattle of the meds cart coming down the row. He half-lifted himself off the mattress, then flopped back down. He was already haggard with fatigue.

Washington, who slept in the rack over Lee-Jay's, was sitting with his long legs dangling over the side, scratching his shins. The other two, Hammer and Savage John, were still stretched on their backs, pretending to be asleep.

"Dude, you awake?" Washington hopped down and began to jog in place.

Lee-Jay rolled his head to look at him. Washington was a tall, skinny kid with big, brown eyes set too far apart, and tiny ears low on his skull. He was looking expectantly at Lee-Jay, as if the question, and the answer, were very important.

"What's it look like," answered Lee-Jay. He cleared his throat. His voice was hoarse, and his chest hurt. It was a combination of cigarettes and dust, smoking too much, working too many hours at his cleaning job.

"You going to work today?" Washington panted.

He churned his arms and legs vigorously. Dressed in his white tee-shirt and blue sweatpants, he looked like a fighter warming up for round one. Lee-Jay watched him lethargically. Washington ate and slept like an athlete, never stopped moving. When he wasn't jumping up and down, or jogging in place, he rocked from side to side, or spun in circles. Prison life didn't bother him one bit, because in the Fort he lived better than he ever had growing up on the east side of Des Moines, with his crack-addicted mother and grandmother.

Lee-Jay both envied and despised Washington's simple-mindedness.

"Going to work?" Washington repeated.

"What's it to you," Lee-Jay said.

He could keep it up all day, never giving Washington any answers, answering his questions with more questions. Washington wasn't very smart.

Lee-Jay sighed and sat up.

"Your mom coming to visit today?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Shut up, you motherfuckers," said Savage John. He had gotten down off his bunk, too, and was pulling on his pants. He was a hulking, middle-aged man with coarse, dark hair and a heavy shadow of beard. His real name was John Savage. He hated blacks, college pricks, and queers. That included all three of his cellmates, because Washington was black, Lee-Jay had a bachelor's degree, and everyone thought Hammer was gay.

"Don't tell me to shut up," said Lee-Jay.

He jumped up and shook himself awake, rolling his head and flexing his shoulders.

He hated Savage John.

"Shut up," Savage John repeated.

He stepped over and thrust his jaw into Lee-Jay's face.

Lee-Jay didn't back away. He brushed one hand over the top of his blonde hair and narrowed his green eyes. His jaw had already been broken once, his long, bumpy nose broken several times. He was taller than Savage John, though the other man outweighed him by more than fifty pounds. However, Lee-Jay was twenty years younger. He didn't mind using his

fists, even though it meant a disciplinary write-up, or even solitary. He almost hoped Savage John would hit him. He was in that kind of mood.

"Hit me, fucker," he said quietly to Savage John. "Come on, I dare you."

He put his chin up and pointed at it, keeping his other arm loose and ready to swing.

"Shut up, you jerks. Nobody cares. Why do you have to pull this shit the minute you wake up?" Hammer had been acting like he was sleeping, but now he sat up, smoothing his thin hair back from his temples with both hands.

"Don't tell *me* to shut up, you faggot," said Savage John, whirling around.

"Shut the *fuck* up, then," replied Hammer.

He hated Savage John, too. Hammer and Savage John stared each other down.

Washington had retreated to the corner of the cell, where he was standing with his back to the older men, swaying back and forth, murmuring, "Uh-oh, uh-oh."

Lee-Jay sighed and sat down on his bunk again.

"Both of you shut the fuck up," he told Hammer and Savage John. "Look at Washington. In a minute, he's gonna piss himself."

Lee-Jay fell back on his mattress, listening to Savage John and Hammer exchange a few more sullen remarks. Washington kept whining in the corner. Lee-Jay spent a moment hating them all impartially, but he was too tired to keep it up.

There was really nothing wrong with his cellmates. Washington was mentally retarded, not a criminal, and Hammer simply a petty thief with a personality disorder. Even Savage John was just a big, dumb farm boy who'd taken a wrong turn somewhere in life, ending up addicted to meth. Lee-Jay understood they were men like him, rounded up and

made accountable for every thought that ever moved them to wrong-headed action.

In rehabilitation class, which was mandatory before a prisoner could apply for parole, the impulse that had landed the men in prison was called “criminal thinking.” Lee-Jay’s particular line was risk-taking, a kind of thrill-seeking that impelled him to drink and gamble and steal and get high. To seek the finality of arrest before he went off the deep end. The Fort was full of men like him and his cellmates, the kind of lawbreakers Iowa produced, men bored to death, constrained by a lack of meaning in life that drove them crazy, made them completely reckless.

Lee-Jay didn’t have anything against Washington or Hammer, or even Savage John, except the kind of complaints that were inevitable when men shared close quarters.

It was just that he was so tired from being awake half the night, dreaming of Hawaii.

“Hey, you boys better cool it.” There was a rattle outside the cell. It was Manson, the day guard, with the meds cart. “Come on, Lee-Jay,” he called. “Get your shit together. Ain’t you working today?”

Manson took a little paper cup off the tray and waited for Lee-Jay to get up and come over to the bars. He watched Lee-Jay closely while he swallowed the pills. Then he handed him another paper cup half-full of water and watched him drink it down. At first, Lee-Jay had resisted the meds, but after the first twelve months of his sentence, he accepted the chemicals that took the edge off, and put a bottom under the depths of his despair. It was easier to do time without the highs and the lows. On meds, Lee-Jay had learned to ride the internal waves that had once threatened to submerge him in their violent undertow. Manson no longer checked the inside of his mouth to make sure the pills had gone down.

"Yah," said Lee-Jay, "I said I'd work again today. At least until my mom gets here."

"So make your bed and get ready, then."

"Yes, sir."

Lee-Jay had a prison janitorial job that ran from six to three every day except Saturday and Sunday, but the D wing captain had asked him to do overtime, so Lee-Jay had been working twenty-two days straight. The pay was seventy-four cents a day, from which thirty cents was deducted for restitution. Another fifteen cents went to his inmate bill. With what was left over, Lee-Jay bought candy and gum from the canteen. He didn't work for the money; he worked to get out of the cell, away from the other men. The mindless, repetitive cleaning tasks gave him plenty of time to daydream. And Lee-Jay liked cleaning because he'd always been fastidious. His sense of smell was keen, and the strong odor of unwashed bodies or dirty clothes disgusted him. You might be a prisoner, but you didn't have to be a filthy pig.

"You'll be in the sick bay again," Manson said.

"No problem," said Lee-Jay.

He nodded at Manson, and Manson moved on down the row with the meds cart. Above, on the second tier of cells, another guard with an identical cart rattled along. The cells were arranged in a quad around the open day room, where men watched television or played cards. At this early hour, the prisoners were still locked in, waiting to file out of D wing to the mess hall, where they would eat breakfast with some of the men from the other three wings.

"Pussy boy," said Savage John. "Always kissing the ass of the Man."

Savage John spent his days lying on his bunk doing nothing, or watching television in

the day room. He thought Lee-Jay was a fool for working.

"Fuck off," said Lee-Jay cheerfully.

At least work gave him something to look forward to.

Manson came back after his meds round, and Lee-Jay walked with him through D wing to the other side of the Fort. Manson unlocked a series of halls and doors, and when they got to the medical wing, Lee-Jay wheeled the two-tiered stainless steel cart full of cleaning supplies out of the closet. He checked the spray bottles while Manson waited patiently.

"I need more disinfectant," said Lee-Jay.

Manson unlocked the chemical storage cupboard and took out a gallon jug of institutional cleaner. Lee-Jay poured some into the spray bottle and added water from the tap. Manson said, "What else you need while I got this open?"

"Couple of dust masks," said Lee-Jay. "Just one, I guess."

Lee-Jay always wore a dust mask because he had allergies, and the cleaning chemicals and dirt irritated his lungs and sinuses. Manson handed him one, and he put it on the top tier of the cleaning cart, along with the rags and dusters.

"That it?"

"I'm good."

The two men went through another set of security doors, Lee-Jay pushing the cart. The guards on duty glanced up from their card game and nodded.

"Howdy, boys," said Lee-Jay.

They ignored him, frowning at their cards.

"All set?" asked Manson.

"Yah. Come back and get me when my mom gets here."

"Right on," said Manson.

He left, and the guard named Jessup looked up from his hand of cards.

"It's nasty back there."

He meant the sick bay, where the men lay in rows of beds.

"Same as yesterday?"

"Yup." The guards both nodded, then went back to their game.

Lee-Jay rolled his cart forward toward the sick bay. Yesterday, some of the men had been vomiting because a flu was running through the prison. A guy from maximum security had come in with a deep gash on his leg, and there were a couple young suicide attempts. One violent prisoner in restraints, subdued, waited out his time in segregation behind a locked door. A few malingerers were trying to get something out of being sick. And then there was Scooter, eighty-one years old, one of a special population of old men dying in the Fort. Scooter had been sick for a week, but it looked like he was going to get better one more time.

The sick bay was cool and dim. Barred windows up high reflected back the dark winter sky. It was very quiet. Lee-Jay left his cart and walked down the aisle between the rows of beds. Most of the men were still sleeping. One of the young kids looked up as Lee-Jay approached, studying his face briefly before turning away.

"Hey," Lee-Jay said as he passed. Sometime he'd sit down and talk to the kid; give him a few tips on how to ride out his time. You had to get on top of it before it got on top of you. Suicide! What a waste of time. Not that every man in prison hadn't wished for death at

one time or another.

He stopped in front of Scooter's bed. The old man was under a stack of blankets because he'd been chilled, despite his fever. The night nurse had put two pillows behind him so that he could sleep propped up, because his skinny chest was full of phlegm. His face was as furrowed as a plowed field, and a bad color, the kind of yellow that comes from internal systems failing to nourish the skin. Lee-Jay didn't want to wake him, but Scooter opened his eyes.

"You look like shit, man," he said to Lee-Jay, as if Lee-Jay were the patient, and not himself. His voice was an old man's treble, forced out around his constricted chest. Scooter had lung cancer that was going to kill him before his life sentence was up. A long time ago, Scooter had taken Lee-Jay under his wing, when he was young and just starting his time.

"I know it," said Lee-Jay. He did feel terrible. His head ached and his sinuses were completely blocked up. "I couldn't sleep."

"Cellies?"

"Mingo."

Scooter smiled.

"Can I get you anything?" Lee-Jay asked.

"No, no. I'm just going to lay here awhile longer."

"Okay, I'm off to clean the john. I'll be back later."

Going on the theory that it takes an hour to clean anything, Lee-Jay estimated he'd be done with the first bathroom around six-thirty. Then on to the other two, then trash. Breakfast clean up. Wipe the mess room tables, sweep and mop everything. Sort the dirty laundry into

the carts by the back door. Break, maybe. Then help out with lunch prep in the little kitchen of the sick bay. Then tidy each sick man's bed, starting with the ones who had gotten up. Rinse out bedpans and pull off soiled bedding. Empty puke buckets. Somewhere in there he had to go see his mom.

Lee-Jay sighed, snapping the strap of his dust mask into place.

When Lee-Jay came back at eleven, Scooter was up and dressed, sitting in a chair. His eyes were sunken, and his cheeks pallid, but he had on his black knit cap and heavy denim coat. On his feet were thick socks and black slippers.

"I'm going out," he said.

"It's awful cold," said Lee-Jay.

"I need some fresh air," said Scooter. "I can't take it any more."

"I got a couple rollies."

The two men and the guard named Jessup went out into the sick bay yard, a little fenced-in and razor-wired space facing south. The sky was brilliant blue, although the wind was blowing hard. The prairie lay motionless under the sky, except for a few black birds winging across the snow-filled fields, looking for something to eat. The furrows that surfaced from the swells of snow were bare of vegetation because the farmer who owned the sections of land surrounding the prison disked the corn and bean stubble under in the fall, and again in the spring. Sometimes in April, when the soil was loose and the winds blew hard, the land rose up around the prison in towering devils of dust that penetrated every barrier and filled the Fort with grit. In winter, the frozen fields were blackened and snow-powdered, a vast, featureless wasteland. On the interstate far away, cars zipped north and south like automated

toys on a track. Jessup went over to his sunny spot against the prison wall and lit up a cigarette. Lee-Jay and Scooter started walking around the perimeter of the concrete yard.

“Man, it’s cold.” The old man hunched his shoulders against the wind.

Lee-Jay pulled the collar of his coat up around his ears. “Seventeen degrees, wind-chill five below, I heard,” he said.

Scooter stopped to lean over and cough spasmodically. When the cold air seized his chest, it paralyzed him. Lee-Jay waited for Scooter to straighten up and wipe his mouth with a handkerchief from his pocket. Then they started to walk around the circle again, Scooter picking his way along carefully in his slippers, occasionally grabbing Lee-Jay’s arm. When they got back to the prison wall, in the sun and out of the wind, Lee-Jay began to jog up and down, while Scooter twisted his upper body and lifted his legs in turn, flexing and straightening them. Finally they were warmed up, and started to walk around the circle again. Lee-Jay took out two hand-rolled cigarettes, offering one to the old man.

“Why not,” said Scooter, nodding at Lee-Jay.

Lee-Jay lit one cigarette and passed it over, then lit the other for himself.

“I should quit,” said Lee-Jay.

“I *did* quit,” said Scooter. “Oh, well. So what were you saying yesterday about that Duke Kahana-what-you?”

“Duke Kahanamoku?”

During the past few days, as they walked around the yard for exercise, smoking one cigarette apiece, Lee-Jay told Scooter stories about Hawaii. The closer the old man got to death, the more questions he asked about the outside, as if when he was finally released, he’d

somehow make his way back there. Lee-Jay didn't mind, because he loved to talk. And he'd been reading and dreaming about islands ever since childhood, when he'd seen pictures of Hawaii in a National Geographic magazine. He knew that the islands were made by violent eruptions under the ocean. The green paradise riding above the waves was just the visible top of the volcanoes lying beneath. Lee-Jay knew about Duke Kahanamoku from reading a book about him in the prison library. The closer Lee-Jay got to his parole hearing, the more he dreamed of Hawaii.

"Duke Kahanamoku," said Lee-Jay. "He was a great surfer, which is what most people remember him for. In fact, they call him the father of surfing. But he was also an incredible swimmer. He won a couple Olympic gold medals for swimming, back in the nineteen-twenties. He was one-hundred-percent native, probably the best athlete Hawaii ever produced. He died the year I was born, nineteen sixty-eight. Even when he was an old man, he was still surfing and swimming."

"I always wanted to surf," said Scooter. "Hell, I always wanted to swim."

Scooter had been in prison sixty-one years, serving life for murder. One day like any other, in a fit of rage after trying to fix a cantankerous baler in the blazing hot sun, he'd killed his father, mother, and two brothers with a scythe. Once he had told Lee-Jay about swimming in the Wapsipinicon River that ran through his father's little bottomland dirt farm in northeast Iowa. But mostly, Scooter and his brothers had just fished the bends and holes of the twisting river, because farm kids didn't go in the water much. But now those memories were like a dream to the old man stranded behind the walls of the Fort. The farm was long gone, the whole family dead. No one from the old hometown ever came to see him anymore. In some

ways, Lee-Jay's Hawaii was more real to Scooter than the Iowa county where he had been born.

"Tell me more," he said.

"I dreamed about the Duke last night," Lee-Jay said. "If I was in Hawaii, I'd hang around his statue on Waikiki Beach all time, even though it is right across from the police station."

"That sounds like heaven right now, man."

"Heaven all right," said Lee-Jay. "I hate Iowa."

"Ain't you an Iowa boy?"

"Not really," said Lee-Jay. "I'm from nowhere and everywhere, I guess you could say. I mean, I grew up in Iowa, but what does that mean? I'm not a farm boy. My dad didn't work for no university, either. Hey, I didn't even have a dad, and if I did, he wasn't from Iowa, anyway. And neither was my mom. The only reason she ended up here was because the car broke down on her way from Vermont to California. So I don't know. I don't want to work at some crappy job, just so I can live in this godforsaken place for the rest of my life. I don't have any reason to stay in this state. There's nothing to do here. As soon as I get out, I'm going to Hawaii."

"What, and leave all this?" Scooter gestured at the wind-blasted prairie.

The two men stopped along the fence and gazed out. There was nothing to see except the monotony of snow-drifted earth, everything black and white, stretching away without relief to the horizon. A familiar swell of impatient disgust heated Lee-Jay's chest, and his head gave a painful throb. Why did the farmer have to strip the land bare? The ground looked

wounded, scalped, like the demolition site of a great disaster. Lee-Jay could never look at the fields without thinking of pictures he'd seen in library books, of the great sea of grass and flowers that used to cover the prairie. Now bare fields stretched in every direction. In the summertime, the land was filled with soybeans and corn, corn and soybeans. Not to mention hogs. Somewhere near the prison was a hog confinement operation with ten thousand head, and on certain days, the wind carried a poisonous waste gas to the prison yard, making the men choke and gag. Between farm chemicals and hog shit, there was no clean water anywhere in the state, no place to safely swim outdoors.

Lee-Jay hated everything about Iowa.

"Anyway," he said, turning away from the fence. He plodded forward, looking at his black prison sneakers. "Duke Kahanamoku was just a beach boy who loved to surf and swim. He was related by blood to royalty, the old kings and queens of Hawaii. But they called him the last Kamehameha, because he was the end of his line. He didn't get married until he was fifty, and then he ended up having no children."

"Childless, like me," said Scooter.

"Me, too," said Lee-Jay.

The two men were silent for a moment, walking and smoking.

"Kahanamoku was more fish than man," Lee-Jay went on. "They say he used to go to school across the street from Waikiki Beach, and every afternoon when he got out, he'd be right in the water. There's this story about a huge wave he rode for more than a mile and a half, back in nineteen-seventeen. There had been earthquakes in Japan, and the surf was really high. He paddled as far as he could out into the ocean off Waikiki Beach, looking for

the perfect wave. When it came, it was a monster, a tsunami, the kind that comes from the earth shaking at its core. The wave was over thirty feet tall! If he had wiped out, he would have been crushed by the weight of the water falling on him. It lifted him up, and he had no choice but to ride it all the way in. Later, the Duke said that he didn't choose the wave, it chose him."

"No kidding?" said Scooter. "I wonder what that means, when that happens."

"I don't know," said Lee-Jay. "What happens when a monster wave chooses you, and then you fall into the ocean?"

"I guess you die," said Scooter.

"Ha, ha," said Lee-Jay. "Guess so."

They had completed their third round of the yard, their cigarette butts crushed and pocketed. They looked over at Jessup. He nodded and called, "Let's go in, boys. It's too cold out here."

Jessup opened the security door, and Lee-Jay walked Scooter back to the sick bay.

"I'm just going to take a little rest," said the old man, pulling off his coat. "I don't know why I feel so tired. They'll call me when it's lunch."

"My mom's coming this afternoon," said Lee-Jay. "And then I've got my AA meeting tonight. I'll be back tomorrow. Think you'll still be here?"

"Here or the morgue."

"Don't talk like that," said Lee-Jay. "You're going to be fine. You've got everything to live for."

"Hah," said Scooter. He swung his legs up on the bed. He lay back against the pillows

with his eyes closed. Lee-Jay spread a flannel blanket over the old man, tucking the ends around his stockinged feet. When he leaned over him, he caught a whiff of something bad.

Tomorrow, he'd make sure Scooter got washed.

It was after lunch when Lee-Jay's mother arrived for visitation. One of the new guards-in-training came to get him, a serious young guy with a fresh criminal-justice degree from the state university. His crisply starched shirt collar was buttoned tightly around his neck. His kind loved getting dressed up, thought Lee-Jay. He probably put on a uniform and played soldier in the National Guard in his spare time. Lee-Jay wondered idly what would happen if he jumped the kid. The guard looked sideways at him, trying to read his mind. Lee-Jay composed his face into a perfect blank and said, "Can you tell the front I'll be there in fifteen minutes? I got to wash up and change my shirt."

Back in the cell, Lee-Jay found his cellmates gone. The air smelled stale and sour. Lee-Jay picked up some of Washington's dirty clothes from the floor and stuffed them into the laundry bag. He went over to the john and flushed it, then wiped the rim with a fold of toilet paper and flushed it again. Savage John was a pig. Lee-Jay ran water into the basin and washed his face. He'd have to shave later. He rinsed out the sink and patted his face dry.

Lee-Jay changed into a clean blue work shirt and brushed his short blonde hair carefully. He hadn't looked closely at his own face for so long that he didn't care what he looked like anymore. He knew there were getting to be lines from the corners of his eyes to the corners of his mouth, but he'd always been handsome. All his years in and out of prisons hadn't changed him that much. He liked to clean up for his mother, because she always took it hard when he started to get dirty and careless of his appearance. She knew how Lee-Jay's

habits of cleanliness disintegrated under the pressure of his depressions. But for a long time now, the meds had buoyed him above the depths that sometimes confined him to his rack like a dirty, unshaven invalid for days, even weeks.

Lee-Jay's mother was in the visiting room, wearing her purple winter coat, carrying a tan purse. As usual, she had struck up a conversation with a young woman, the wife or sister or girlfriend of the husband, brother, or boyfriend behind bars. Both women were smiling, only a little more strained than if they had been in a dentist's office. Lee-Jay took his seat behind the clear partition, and the guard caught his mother's attention, motioning her over.

She was getting old, with white hair, and a hump between her broad shoulders. She was not as tall as she used to be, and she looked thinner than she'd been a few months ago. Lee-Jay knew his mother had been on a diet, but she seemed to be shrinking in stature at the same time. Lee-Jay's heart jumped when he saw how her thin cheeks had started to sag into the folds of her neck.

"Hello there, Lee-Jay," she sing-songed into the speaking transom between the plexi-glass partitions, as she settled into her chair.

"Hi, Mom. How are you?"

"I'm just fine. What about you?"

"I'm well," said Lee-Jay. "A little tired. Did I tell you how many days in a row I've been working?"

"In your last letter, you said almost twenty, I think."

"Yah," said Lee-Jay. "They just pulled me off another shift half an hour ago." He settled back in his chair, stretching his long legs.

"Don't get overtired," warned his mother. "You have to remember to keep your stress level down."

"I know," said Lee-Jay. "A man's gotta know his limitations."

"Look at me," said his mother. "All those years as city clerk, working for those jerky mayors that couldn't get along with anybody. Now that I'm retired, I have to watch my blood pressure. The doctor told me I have to stay out of high-stress situations. I just can't take it anymore."

Her voice had gone high, but she lowered it. She looked sidelong at the guard who was watching the visitors for signs of disturbance. Sometimes when she talked too loudly, a guard would frown in her direction, and Lee-Jay would shush her.

"You're right," said Lee-Jay. "Stress is bad for me, too."

"How's your AA group coming?"

"Fine," said Lee-Jay. "I'm taking it seriously this time. I really am. I'm sick of messing up. I think I'm getting ready to get out of this place."

"Good," said his mother. "I'm saving up a little money from my retirement check, so if you do get paroled, I can help out with rent and deposits, maybe some housekeeping stuff."

"Thanks, Mom. I really do appreciate everything you've done for me."

"What does your sponsor say about your Iowa City plan?"

Lee-Jay's parole-hearing plan included relocation to Iowa City, a college town where there was enough opportunity for anonymity to suit him. He didn't want to go back to the town where his mother lived, because of the drug crowd he knew there. He was working out the Iowa City plan with a sponsor from the outside who volunteered in the prison's

Alcoholics Anonymous program.

"He thinks it's a good idea," said Lee-Jay. "He thinks it'll help me keep away from the drugs."

Not that there wasn't a drug crowd in Iowa City. There was. But Lee-Jay didn't know anyone, so he could at least give sobriety a good start before running into temptation. The worst possible thing would be to fall in with the college-student crowd, as he had always done in the past. But he was probably too old for that now, anyway. He was trying to locate an AA group of ex-cons in Iowa City, because his sponsor said he would need to have better-quality friends if he wanted to stay sober.

"What about a job?" his mother asked.

"My sponsor told me about a couple places that hire ex-cons. I've got a good chance there, too, since I have a degree. I'm in a better position than a lot of guys getting out of prison."

"Well, what kind of job are you looking at?"

"I don't know, Mom. Human resources recruiting, like I did in Arizona? Janitorial, maybe?"

Lee-Jay was starting to feel annoyed at his mother. Her questions reminded him of Washington.

"You've just got to work," said his mother. "Even if it's at a low-wage fast-food joint."

"Yes, I know," said Lee-Jay. "I'm planning on working, so I can save up for a plane ticket, which shouldn't take me too long. Do you know how cheap it is to fly to Hawaii?"

“Oh, Lee-Jay, there you go about Hawaii again. You’ve got to get Hawaii out of your head! You need to buckle down and make some kind of life for yourself here in Iowa. Your fantasizing is just a way of not facing up to reality. What does your criminal-thinking counselor say when you talk about Hawaii?”

“Nothing,” said Lee-Jay.

He had learned not to mention Hawaii in his rehabilitation group. The counselor got mad whenever he brought it up. He was a guard who’d attended a two-day state-sponsored training to earn a certificate for criminal-thinking, and he’d never been out of Iowa in his life. He had mocked Lee-Jay once, saying, “Oh, and I suppose you’re just going to get off a plane in Hawaii to live like some kind of royal bum on the beach, and everything’s gonna be wonderful, happy ever after! Working stiff like me can’t even afford a one-week vacation in Hawaii! That’s either a delusion of grandeur or evasion of responsibility, I’m not sure which. But I’m pretty sure it’s criminal thinking.”

Lee-Jay hadn’t mentioned Hawaii in a couple weeks.

“Well, I hope you don’t talk about it like you used to. You’ve got to learn to recognize an obsession when you see it in yourself. Remember, obsessive-compulsive disorder runs in the family. Dreaming about Hawaii is just living in a fantasy world!”

“I know, I know,” said Lee-Jay. “I was just kidding. I’m not going to Hawaii. I’m not even ready to go to Iowa City yet. Believe me, I’m not living in a fantasy world.”

“Good,” said his mother.

Then she started telling a story about some of the old widow ladies in her high-rise retirement home. The place was full of backstabbing and gossip, as vicious as any prison.

There was a security lock on the door in the front lobby, but some of the old women propped it open with a stick on days when they were expecting visitors or delivery men. Others were lobbying the management to get the practice stopped, because what was the point of having security if wasn't used properly? She herself was opposed to the practice of door-propping, but she wasn't one to take sides. She had to watch her stress level.

Lee-Jay glanced surreptitiously at the clock high up on the wall. Not that he was tired of his mother's visit already. He was content to just sit there, looking at his mother's face while she rattled on. But Lee-Jay wanted to tell Scooter one more thing, something he'd forgotten until this very minute.

It was about the Duke's surfboard.

The key to survival when a monster wave chooses you and lifts you up is a board, a real koa wood Hawaiian surfboard. Duke Kahanamoku's was sixteen feet long, and weighed one hundred and fourteen pounds. Sometimes he called it his log. The bottom was curved to match the shape of the swell, and the top was a generously wide platform, olo-style, the kind once made for Hawaii's kings.

Lee-Jay would tell Scooter that in order to ride the tsunami, a man has to have a solid place in all that water, to crouch and shift, to secure his balance, to stand.

A Little Part of It in Everyone

It is midnight, or two, or three o'clock in the morning, when the telephone in my bedroom rings. There's no answering machine, but whoever is on the other end isn't going to quit, so it just keeps ringing and ringing. I'm too tired to get up and answer it. My back aches from shoveling snow, and my arms that were sore earlier now are completely numb from the shoulders down to the tips of my little fingers. I figure if I ignore the caller, sooner or later, the ringing will stop. Somewhere in the shadows of the ceiling, a dark bird seems to be hovering, right around the top of Clint Eastwood's black-hatted head in the Joe Kidd poster on my closet door. I lie in bed with my arms crossed over my chest, waiting for silence.

It's one of those January weeks in Iowa when it snows so much that you are at it morning, noon, and night, just to keep from being marooned in the drifts. Even in town, it might as well be open prairie, the way the wind piles the snow into sculptured dunes, glittering under the sun like the eerie landscape of a distant, frozen planet. And it's cold—below zero for nineteen consecutive days. Some people say it's too cold for snow, but that's not true. The stuff comes down like thick crystalline sugar, so heavy it packs itself solid with its own weight. Then the sun comes out and melts it a bit; then at night, it freezes solid again. Add more snow; repeat. So far, five feet of snow has fallen. My life has been narrowed to a nightly cycle of unconscious recovery, followed by another day of shoveling snow.

Not only am I shoveling myself out, but I am also taking care of my elderly neighbors the world seems to have forgotten. Old Mrs. Ellis and her even more feeble husband depend

on me to keep their driveway clear so they can creep their ancient station wagon three blocks up the street to the Fareway store for white bread and milk and the Coors Lite she drinks with her daily cigarette. And somehow, I've been roped into doing snow removal for the worst slumlord in town, a rich man with a lot of old boarding houses that he rents out to Mexican packing-plant workers and Chinese students. I'm only doing it because I need his money, which, admittedly, is something less than minimum wage, if you add up all the time I actually work.

Still, I don't care. It feels good to be working outside, even if it is killing me. I hate being cooped up in this old house, where everything is shabby and worn and falling apart. Outdoors, the air is clean as a new knife, the wide sky empty and blue during the brilliantly sunny days. All week, I've been running in my old truck from snow job to snow job, the only woman in a business dominated by men. The phone ringing is probably someone wanting me to shovel more snow. I lie numb in my bed, falling into a reverie about snow removal, the way you see cornstalks passing before your eyes after detassling in the fields.

Before dawn, the sky is still dark, though snow glows with its own white light. At that hour, the streets are deserted, except for the troops of snow removers. The cold air carries the ringing sound of blades, plow boys in their Blazers, scraping the parking lots of Main Street downtown. A thick, redolent layer of exhaust hangs just above the treetops. When I park my blue Chevy and hop out in front of the boarding house, the cold bites my lips like the kiss of a snake, but soon enough, I'm stripping off my red parka, down to the black overalls and bright yellow turtleneck that are my trademark attire.

Shoveling snow works up a sweat in a hurry. By the time the first *trabajador* comes

out, scratching his black head and tiptoeing across the sidewalk in his golden calfskin cowboy boots, I am finished. I raise my shovel, a wide-bladed yellow Yoho, in triumph, while the Mexican stares. Snow removal in one of the worst winters in history is as intimidating and intoxicating as running a marathon. Every night, in the back of my mind, even while I'm sleeping, a mingled dread and excitement is forming, because the dense quiet enshrouding the house tells me that, once again, it's snowing. Even now, though it is past midnight, this phone call is probably one of my clients, panicked by the sight of more snow, untroubled at waking me up. I'm not answering, I think from the depths of my exhaustion, because the town's snow ordinance gives you twenty-four hours, at least, to get the sidewalks cleared. They can all wait until morning.

Some hours earlier, I took a little white pain pill that may or may not be working, because when I move, a deep ache in my right shoulder makes me groan out loud, even though my arms are completely dead. Despite the irritating noise of the telephone, I try desperately to fall back to sleep, but there is a child in the bed beside me, a girl, my daughter. She is small and warm and solid. Her spine is curved, touching mine because we are lying back-to-back, but each time the phone rings, she bucks against me, slamming her small heels into the back of my thighs.

"Ouch!" I protest. "Darn it, Jane, quit kicking me!"

The child growls as if cursing me back. I am nothing. I am the mother, the shoveler, the phone answerer, the solver of all problems; the one who always gets out of bed. And if Jane wakes up completely, there'll be no more sleeping for the rest of the night. So I haul myself out of the warm nest we've made under a pile of quilts and sleeping bags, and limp

across the cold, dark room to where the telephone is still making its noise.

“Hello?”

My voice is tenuous.

My hands prickle unpleasantly as the blood starts rushing into my fingertips. I switch on the dresser lamp, turning away from the mirror, because my eyes lit from below are deep sockets that reveal the shape of my skull. My body is taking a beating, and it shows in my face. The bare wood floor is freezing, so I bend over to retrieve my slippers from under the bed. Of course they aren't there, because Jane likes to put them on and shuffle around the house. I start to shiver because the north wind is blasting through the loose, rattling bedroom window.

Lifting the shade, I see snowflakes eddying under the streetlight outside.

“Damn,” I say automatically.

More snow.

“Not you,” I add, speaking into the mouthpiece. It is probably old Mrs. Ellis.

There is no one on the other end of the phone.

“Hello!” I say again. “Who is it?”

Then a distant wail crackles its way through the line, and I seem to hear its faint echo down the street.

“Hello? Hello?” a man's voice says briskly over the noise.

Right away, I know it's trouble. I have an intuition for trouble. Trouble of one kind or another is why I hate answering the phone, and the only reason why I ever bother to pick it up.

The man on the other end gives his name: a cop. I know him. In a town this small, everybody knows everyone else. Plus he has been to my house before on official business.

“Who is this?” he demands.

I say who I am.

I am not lying. Sometimes I lie to callers when I think they might be bill collectors. Sometimes I say I’m the housekeeper, which is technically a fact. Usually I pretend it’s a wrong number. But this time, I have a gut feeling, so I tell the truth. I know the cop recognizes my voice.

“Listen,” he says. “It’s not good. I’m with the ambulance here. You’ve got to meet us up at Mercy.”

In the bed, my daughter thrashes her legs and cries, “Mommy!” in that self-righteous, demanding tone young children take when you’re on the phone and you need them to be quiet. With the handset in hand, I stretch the cord out full length, trying to get back over to the bed to cover her up. I grope under the blankets for her Binky, which she is too old for, but still insists on at bedtime.

“Why?” I ask. “What is it?”

“Isn’t your son Em?” asks the cop, and then speaks my son’s full name, Emmett Newton, as if reading it from a card.

Emmett is seventeen, and for a moment, I imagine he’s sleeping in his black-lighted and incensed bedroom in the basement. Then I remember that he hasn’t lived at home for more than six months. He is across town in a ramshackle apartment with two other boys from high school who’ve also left their mothers.

Emmett is trouble, a lot of trouble. Being his mother is like having a chronic illness.

"Yes," I reply. "What's he done now?"

"We're transporting him," says the cop. "Arriving shortly. You need to come to the hospital right now."

My heart starts pounding so painfully that I think one more time I really should quit smoking altogether, though I am down to only a pack a week.

"But I'm all alone here, and I have the little one asleep! Can't you send someone over to help me? Just tell me what happened!"

"Meet us at the emergency room," the cop says, as if he doesn't hear a word I'm saying. "We'll be there in five minutes. I'm afraid it's serious this time. Sorry, ma'am."

There were other times when Em got picked up by the cops, but this is the first time he's been transported by ambulance instead of police car.

I hang up the phone and start bundling Jane into her snowsuit, while she protests bitterly and tries to hit me. I pull a wool hat over her curly blonde hair and she immediately snatches it off. She spits her Binky on the floor. I pick it up and stuff it back in her mouth. She is always battling me, just like her brother.

After the struggle to dress her, I decide not to take time to change my clothes, because my yellow flannel pajamas printed with red rockets and airplanes are as warm as anything else under my black snow overalls. Carrying Jane in my aching arms, I rush into the kitchen and thrust my bare feet into the still-damp snow boots I find drying where I left them when I came in from shoveling snow. Grabbing my purse off the counter, I check that my keys are in it, then sling my dirty red snow-shoveling parka over one shoulder without putting my arms

into the sleeves. Running out the back door, I have that sense of weakness and separation that comes after extreme physical effort, but fear has made me even more lightheaded.

In the garage, I thrust Jane into the truck through the driver's door, and clamber up beside her. Fumble the keys into the ignition with my hands shaking like they belong to someone else. The engine whirs and turns over once, then chokes and dies. I try it again. And again.

"Piece of shit!" Tears of rage and panic sting my eyelids.

The truck is old, and the gas tank almost empty. I put my head down on the steering wheel and whisper to the God I no longer believe in, calling him Mother just in case. I wait a minute in the darkness, then press the gas pedal to the floor and turn the key over. Rrr-rr. Rrr-rr. Finally, at the last minute, before the battery fails completely, the engine rumbles to life and thick exhaust seeps up through the rusty floorboards into the cold cab.

"Thank God!" I exclaim. "Goddess," I add, just in case.

When I hit the remote opener, the garage door creaks upward, the worn mechanism shrieking with cold. Jane is whimpering, but more quietly now because sweet guitar notes from a Neil Young song on a tape in the tape deck pour forth: "I sing the song because I love the man, I know that some of you don't understand." The song is about drug addicts. When the chords of the song die away, I punch the tape silent and sit there shivering with my bare hands under my thighs, waiting for the cab to warm up. The heater is running full blast, but the air from the vent is a frigid stream. I pull Jane over to my side and cover her with my parka. Our breath fogs the windshield so I can barely see. For the hundredth time, I wonder how we will manage if I finally lose this old truck.

The narrow driveway is drifted with the new snow that has been falling, framed on either side by huge heaps I laboriously piled up earlier, one scoop at a time, with the Yo-Ho and a little antique grain shovel that's just my size. Now there's no time to clear away the fresh snow, but my truck is a big old 1971 Chevy custom Sierra riding on new twenties I just bought on credit, so I resolve to muscle my way through. Backing out, I roll down the window to navigate, and there's the moon over my shoulder, a distant orb ringed by haze, hung up in the bare branches of the trees. Soon it will be totally obscured by thick clouds. The streetlights shed their pale glow on frozen snow heaped so high that the street is just an invisible tunnel in between. At the end of the driveway, one rear tire crunches into a deep snow bank, and for a minute I'm afraid I'm hung up, but when I gun it, the truck shoots out into the street. Jane is still crying. In the back of my mind, I wonder if it's wrong to sacrifice one child for the other. I wonder what she will remember of this night, what she'll blame me for later.

The emergency room is flooded with fluorescent light that blinds me when I stumble through the door in my clumsy boots, with Jane held close to my chest. There is no one behind the bulletproof window of the receptionist's desk. However, my son's girlfriend is sitting alone in the waiting room, hunched over on a green plastic chair, with her arms dangling between her legs, and her long brown hair hanging down the back of her denim jacket. Automatically, I notice she's not dressed for the weather, but in Iowa, the young, pretty girls never are.

"Lindsay!" I exclaim. "What is it? What happened?"

She lifts her head. Her pale oval face is a blank—nothing to read there. She looks

cautiously at Jane, says carefully that there's a chaplain coming in a minute, then points to a half-open door down the hall. We go and sit in a small dark room crowded with four chairs and a table, me shifting my sniffling daughter on my lap, Lindsay hugging herself and avoiding my gaze.

"Tell me!" I urge.

"It was an accident," she says abstractedly. "I don't think he meant to do it. See, we were at a party, me and him and Jake and Eric. When we got home, Em went into the bathroom and he was, like, in there forever. I guess we kind of forgot about him. We were just drinking and talking and listening to music, and I don't how long it was, but all of a sudden, we hear this crash from the bathroom. We don't think anything of it. I guess we're all being stupid, but a long time later, or maybe it was just a few minutes, I realize it's the sound of someone falling, so I run over to the bathroom and try to open the door, but I can't, and when I kneel down to look under the crack, I see Em's shoulder—"

I jump to my feet with Jane fussing on my hip and start swaying back and forth to keep her quiet. I am not sure what Lindsay means, or what has happened to Em, but I suddenly realize this is unimportant. She is talking about seeing my son's body on the floor. I can't seem to catch my breath.

"—because the way he's laying there, he's blocking it. So Jake and Eric, they bust the door down and haul him out—"

"Oh, my God!"

"—and then Jake and Eric start doing CPR, because right away, we all know he's dead, and I can't believe they know how to do it, because I'm sure they never had any

lessons; so I'm on the phone with nine-one-one, but it seems like it's taking too long to explain, because all the while, Jake is pounding on Em's chest and Eric is blowing into his mouth, but Em is just laying there, not breathing, and his face is all purple. And I never saw anyone be that color before—"

Lindsay breaks off and starts sobbing.

Jane bursts into tears again, too.

I am frozen. My lips tingle strangely.

Just then, the hospital chaplain comes in. He is a tall man with a white collar around his neck and a long, dark coat. He gives me and the two girls a speculative look.

"He's alive," he says without preamble. "Shall we pray?"

I leave Jane with Lindsay when a tired-faced nurse with a permanent scowl comes to take me to the curtained cubicle where my son is laid out on a gurney. His face looks like it's modeled from white putty. It's a death face—I know, because I've seen one before. With his habitual set-jawed, frowning expression stripped away from his handsome face, my son resembles the infant who emerged from my body years before: calm yet slightly peeved; distracted from something important; resolved to ignore the chaos around him. His eyes are closed. He is bare to the waist, and there are tubes up his nose. His chest is rising and falling.

"That's the machine," the nurse says. "Breathing for him. It's okay, if you want to come over and touch him."

The emergency-room doctor, a middle-aged man with an Indian name on his tag, looks up and frowns at me; says nothing; goes back to jotting notes on a clipboard. I am

conscious of my long, tangled hair, my dark-circled eyes, my bright yellow flannel pajama top and black overalls, my old snow boots. I look like hell. I wonder if the doctor thinks I'm a bad mother. Hospital emergencies like Em's, young men overdosed on drugs or alcohol, or smashed up in car wrecks, or shot by one another, or suicide attempts, are common around here, and everyone's always looking for someone to blame. Usually it's the mother. Maybe they're right, and this whole thing is all my fault, I think. But I can't be all that bad, because at least my son didn't die.

"You're really lucky," says the nurse, as if reading my thoughts. "If it weren't for his friends, he'd be dead. They saved his life, you know."

Jake, heavy-set and tattooed, with a ring in his lip and black-rimmed glasses. Eric, undernourished and pale, with long sandy hair and a face full of freckles. These boys who've grown up fatherless and rough like my own son are now unlikely heroes. I am not surprised. They are tough and resourceful, determined to prove themselves men by doing everything the hard way. First things first: leave your mother. I am just grateful that Em's friends were there for him when I wasn't.

I go over to the gurney and take Em's hand. There is a thick scar on the tender inside of his left forearm, just below the elbow. One night when Em was fifteen, he took a sterling silver ring wrought in the shape of a wolf's head that I gave him for his birthday, and heated it white-hot with a cigarette lighter. Then he pressed it into his flesh. The next day, he showed me the burn, a brand, really, and said, Doesn't this prove how much I love you?

Why does he think he needs to prove it, I wonder for the ten thousandth time.

The scar is livid on his pale arm.

When I take Em's hand in mine, there is nothing; no response. His long, tapered fingers are rough, like a man's. I study his face, because it has been a long time since I've had the chance to really look at him. There is a fine blonde stubble along his jaw line. A few blackheads dot his brow, and one of his nostrils is crusted with dark blood. His body exudes the stink of sweat and booze, and something else so pungent I know it is the odor of death. I notice that the fly of his filthy jeans is undone, so I reach over and tug the zipper up.

"Barn door's open, Em," I say foolishly.

"That's enough, now," says the doctor, looking up from his paperwork. He nods at the nurse, who takes my arm and leads me away.

No place is more lonely than a hospital room before dawn. Lindsay has left with Jane, taking her home to her mother's house for the night, leaving me alone with Em. The nurses, what few there are, seem to disappear, and those working keep busy with unseen patients for whom dawn is the darkest hour. Slumped in an armchair with my chin in one hand, I keep watch over my son, whose chest is rising and falling in measured, mechanical suspiration. There is a soft, rhythmic shushing sound like a heartbeat from the machine that is breathing for him. Em is lying on his back, hands palm-up at his sides, utterly still, as I haven't seen him for a long time, ever since he was a child sleeping. Blood tests have revealed the nature of the toxic substance he injected into his vein, and he may have gone as long as ten minutes without oxygen after the overdose. Now he is in a coma. Never before did I feel more alone than I do at this moment, waiting for Em to wake up.

My mind starts drifting in the metronome of the clicking machinery, and I can't hold

on to consciousness anymore, and then I am falling, falling into a dream, and when I finally come to, lying in a ditch filled with black water, I am still dressed in my yellow flannel pajamas, but the pattern of red rockets and airplanes is obliterated by cold, slimy mud. A burning smell hangs in the air. Violently shivering because I'm soaking wet in the frigid autumn night, I crawl up out of the ditch. The darkness is full of shouts and screams, while a tumult of men and machines seethes around me. Explosions shatter the night sky like Chinese fireworks. Masts of tall ships are smoking on a blazing lake. Turning my back on the horrific scene, I start running as fast as I can down the dirt road under my feet.

After trudging for hours, around dawn, I meet up with a young man, another survivor like me. He's wearing a long, black trench coat, and his narrow, pale face is set in lines of worry and fear. Somehow, I understand that he seems familiar to me because we've been through the same war.

Where are you going, I ask him.

South, he says.

He tells me that a mothership is waiting over the next set of long, low hills to take survivors away from this inhospitable planet. He has been spared for a reason, he says.

Wondering about myself, I ask him how he knows this, and he says with a grim smile, Because I've been in on this story for a very long time.

Come, follow me, he says.

Waking suddenly from the annihilation dream with my scalp prickling, I stand up to stretch my aching legs, shaking the nightmare away. I feel like I've been running all night. Somewhere past the half-open door, the morning-shift nurses are twittering around their

station in the white hallway like sparrows at a birdfeeder, but no sound from outside penetrates the thick glass of the sealed windows. I go over to gaze down into the street. A few cars are crawling past the hospital's main entrance through the heavy snow that has been falling all night. Looking out, I have a sense of dislocation, because I seem to have been away on a very long journey; yet the world continued in its old, familiar path while I was gone.

Now there's all this new snow that has to be shoveled by someone.

I stand there wondering for the millionth time why I live in this God-forsaken state, where the winters are one long struggle to survive. Iowa is dying. It's a graveyard for old people, a crossroads for drug runners, a blank spot on the map that it's best to pass over on your way to somewhere else. Right at this moment, old Mrs. Ellis is probably frantic, giving herself a heart attack trying to shovel her way out to the car. The slumlord whose tenants are snowed in will fire me when I don't show up by eight. My old truck is illegally parked in front of the emergency room door, and probably won't start anyway, so I'll end up walking home in my pajamas through the snow. Everyone passing by will think, there's one of those crazy ladies escaped from the sixth floor of Mercy. Sometimes I wish I could run away from all this. I'd head south and never come back.

When the dim light of morning begins to hurt my swollen eyes, I tilt the blinds shut and go over to Em's side to push back the greasy blonde bangs that are always hanging over his face. He looks so peaceful. It could be the start of any ordinary day, except that Em is still asleep. When he was a toddler, Em never wanted to sleep. In the afternoon, exhausted by his frenetic hyperactivity, I used to carry him to bed, lying down on one side to spoon my large body around his small one. Throwing one of my legs over his, I would curl my arm around

his chest to immobilize him. Wide awake, Em would struggle and squall in desperate rage until he was blue-faced and breathless, while I held him down, grimly humming a lullaby that he hated to hear me sing. Breathing in and out deeply, slowing my heartbeat, I willed him to sleep, while Em fought until he was helpless, then grew limp, his hair slick with the sweat of his surrender. Only then would he relax, falling asleep with shuddering sobs against my body, letting me hold him in the only tenderness he ever allowed me to show. Lying beside him, my heart breaking over the brave fight he put up, with his round, hard head of soft blonde hair resting under my chin, I would breathe in his sour, milky, powdery scent that always made me feel like his mother, until I fell asleep, too.

Now the rank smell of Em is comforting somehow, and it is no trouble to find a narrow space at his side where my body and his fit together like a chimera: mother and monster. The shush and click of the respirator is soothing as a womb. Lying next to my son, I notice in the crook of Em's elbow, just above the burn scar, a tiny purple hole where the needle's damage was done. I wet my fingertip and press it over the wound. My breath mingles with Em's and the room is so warm I can't keep my eyes open any longer, and then I'm drifting again, but this time, instead of dreaming about annihilation, I'm sinking into the snow that I sense falling outside the hospital window, a soundless, crystalline matrix that buries me in deep quietude. Drowsily reflecting on the day of shoveling ahead, my heart starts pumping with dreadful excitement, but it doesn't wake me. Instead, it suffuses me with warmth, and seems to give me energy that feels like hope. No matter how much I hate snow, I never feel more alive than when I've been shoveling all day. I can't wait to get back out in the cold. I throw my arm over Em's chest and sink into silence like a kid falling backward into a

deep bank of the white stuff.

Sometime later, Em begins to thrash and pull at the tubes in his nose; tries to say something in a hoarse voice.

Then a nurse rushes in and actually screams, and I'm rolling off the bed, saying, "Sorry, so sorry. I didn't mean to disturb him."

The nurse gives me a dirty look and pushes me away from the bed.

"No, no, no!" she says loudly, grabbing Em's wrists. "You have to leave those tubes alone! Do you want me to strap your hands down?"

When I look at Em, his eyes are wide open with fear, and he's staring straight at me, though he's so sick that later he won't remember this moment. As the nurse propels me toward the door, scolding, Em follows us with his gaze, and when I turn to say "I'll be back," his eyes meet mine, pleading; and if he seems to be saying *I need you right now*, it's only because we're one flesh, separated temporarily by this condition no medicine can cure.

Requiem for an Owl

One warm, windy afternoon in early March, speeding east by car on a stretch of old Highway 30 in rural Iowa, I glimpsed something beckoning from the opposite shoulder: a ruffled wing raised high like an arm waving for help, the body of a large, dead bird. Its dun color blended in with the golden landscape of tall grass left over from winter, but the long, dark feathers caught my eye unexpectedly with their wild fluttering. I was in deep country, one side all lowlands too wet for crops; the other, a hilly landscape of exhausted prairie, invasive red cedars, vehicle junkyards, and abandoned farmhouses. An unseasonably warm wind gusted strongly out of the south, blowing through the car vents with a sumptuous whiff of Otter Creek Marsh, a chain of swampy pools between the highway and the Iowa River. The bird lay before a small creek bridge, few miles east of the Meskwaki Casino, a big gambling joint owned by the Sac and Fox tribe, where, minutes before, I had pointed out to the two little girls in my back seat the long abstract feathers projecting skyward over the smoked-glass entrance doors. I am not a gambler, but in my present condition, faced with an imminent job loss, I could imagine my hands cupped under an unending stream of silver. Yet my foot never relaxed its pressure on the gas. The girls glanced out of their windows briefly, uninterested in the casino, absorbed in their backseat games. We sped past the parking lot full

of buses and cars. Then the road narrowed and swung around a curve, where to the south lay woods and small corn patches, and those boxy pre-fab houses that signal “reservation,” though in this case, the land was the only Indian-owned settlement in America. Somewhere between Indian country and the rest of the world I spotted the great horned owl.

“Oh, look!” I exclaimed. “A bird.”

I’m not an expert, but I knew by the barred feathers and the great length of fluttering wing what it was. Yet even as I spoke, I regretted it, because my daughter and her best friend were wild about owls, ever since the Harry Potter books. *They’ll freak*, I thought, glancing at them in the rearview mirror.

“Where?” said Jane and Betsy simultaneously, looking out their windows into the sky.

“Never mind,” I said. “Flew away.”

I was glad they hadn’t seen it.

Over the miles, while the girls had been preoccupied in the back seat, I had seen plenty of road kill, Iowa’s grisly harbinger of spring. These bottomland woods watered by the Iowa River had yielded up winter-weary skunk, possum, coon, deer, muskrat, rabbit, and squirrel in pursuit of food and mates, only to be flattened on the highway. Disgusting, I thought, passing one lump of fur after another. I hated to hit anything while driving, going to dangerous lengths to swerve if an animal crossed my path. Given my dark outlook on the uncertain status of my future, the day’s carnage seemed an indictment of America’s barbarism: addicted to cars, and always killing somewhere. Yet these feathers were the only ones I had seen. Such a big bird! Unsettled, I shook my head.

My eyes in the rearview mirror behind gold-tinted sunglasses reflected back my own sour mood.

“Hey, girls,” I said in an attempt at lightness. “What’s up with you back there?”

My voice was hoarse because I was sick with a spring cold.

The two little girls didn’t answer. They were happily vocalizing two-part harmony to a song they’d learned in fifth-grade band: “Ba *bum* bum-bum bum.”

I was taking my daughter, Jane, to a figure-skating competition in Cedar Rapids. Her best friend, Betsy, was along for moral support.

It was almost spring break, and I was worn out from a semester of trying to write while teaching English composition to under-prepared first-year students at Iowa State University. I had just learned that my contract for the next year would not be renewed, and job prospects were non-existent, because everywhere in America, English teachers were practically worthless.

Yet I was trying to put panic out of my mind, for Jane’s sake. She’d been practicing for weeks in the high-stakes world of juvenile figure skating, and I’d been practicing with her, taking time out of my busy schedule to join her on the ice, despite my almost fifty-year-old body. Jane’s competition was the culmination of months of work for both of us. I wanted to feel upbeat and positive, modeling calm confidence to my young daughter, who was trying not to be nervous about her competition performance.

Yet I kept hearing in my mind *losing my job, just lost my job, lost her job, loser.*

For miles down the highway, I couldn’t get the sight of the dead owl’s fluttering wing out of my mind, but the girls in the back seat remained mercifully innocent.

“Mom, listen. Did you hear us? We were singing ‘Let’s Go, Band’!”

“Uh-huh,” I replied, absently. “I heard you. Sounds good!”

For these girls, best friends, all that was necessary for a successful journey was a mother in the driver’s seat and each other. Yet I felt utterly alone. For the hundredth time in as many days, I wished I had another adult next to me to share my thoughts and fears with. As always, when the road seemed unbearably long, I started to daydream.

The fields were dun, I enunciated wordlessly. The bird’s wing blended in with the golden landscape.

Arranging the words in my head acted on me like anodyne.

I sat up straighter in the front seat and began to notice the tawny reds and golds of the grassy terrain. This part of the state, with its hills and valleys along the Iowa River, was no good for flat-out fencerow-to-fencerow commodity farming, so the swells and swales of tall grass were grazed by milk cows and a goat herd or two, and dotted with fields that were more like backyard gardens. The land spoke of poor people: no farmer in Iowa ever got rich off eighty acres of corn, forty of beans, and a herd of lanky animals. A few of the old farmhouses were spectacularly dilapidated, with peeling paint and staved-in rooflines, their yards of churned mud littered with rusting pickups and ancient red or green farm implements. At one place, a dirty white dog chained to a bare tree lunged madly at the car when we passed. It was hard to believe anyone in America lived in such squalor, especially because overhead, the sky blazed blue as a vast mural of heaven. A procession of towering white clouds marching away in grandeur to the horizon’s edge completed the picture of infinity mounted like priceless art over the cringing prairie below.

The huge sky over the ruined landscape was one reason why I never wanted to leave Iowa. Being under this blue heaven made me feel sanctified, holy.

Yet Cedar Rapids was the same grimy city I'd known for decades, with its signature stench of burnt cereal from the Quaker Oats food-processing plant. Crossing the I-380 bridge, where the tall grain elevators of the factory had their feet practically in the waters of the Cedar River, the girls exclaimed in horror at the post-apocalyptic vision of the towering chimneys spewing billows of white particles into the blue sky.

"Ewww! It stinks!" said Jane. "What is it?"

"That's where they make food," I replied. "Stuff to eat."

"I don't want to eat anything made in a place like that!" Jane exclaimed. "Do we have to eat that food, Mom?"

"Never," I reassured her. "Don't worry about it. That factory is owned by Pepsi."

"Oh," Jane sighed in relief. "Thanks, Mom."

I smiled.

Jane was a ten-year-old athlete with high nutrition demands and a picky appetite. She had a healthy horror of junk food in all its guises, including the popular breakfast cereals manufactured by Quaker Oats, which was owned by the many-tentacled Pepsico company. Jane had never drunk Pepsi. She scorned kids whose dependence on sugared soft drinks made them soft and sluggish.

Being her mother felt good, especially when she made me smile.

"Hey, girls, we're on vacation," I caroled. "It's my party, and I'll smile if I want to!"

"Smile if I want to!" the girls returned in unison.

It was our own version of the old, familiar song.

We checked into the Marriott hotel with a group of skating families, ordinary Midwesterners like ourselves, there to support our children. Busy unpacking with Jane and Betsy, and then shepherding them between hotel floors, splashing in the pool, and visiting friends, I forgot my own misery, though once or twice, meeting up with other parents, some of whom might be in a position to hire me, I was tempted to mention that I needed a job. But something held me back.

That night in the hotel bar, Blaine, a pub owner from back home, picked up our tab for margaritas and beer, while Bob, the newspaper executive, regaled us with stories about his old rodeo days in Texas. DeAnn, crippled with premature arthritis, recollected her encounter with the famous rock-and-roll band. It was obvious no one wanted to talk about the real world outside the hotel. I sipped my margarita and laughed at the cowboy's stories, twinkling my eyes at him until he was fairly dazzled.

Jane, Betsy, and the daughters of other skating parents spent hours riding up and down between floors with a gang of young boys in baggy jerseys and shorts who were in town for a basketball tournament. We adults in the bar watched the glassed-in elevator ascend and descend, nodding at each other with rueful pride, basking in the security of a carefree weekend in five-star hotel while our high-spirited children ran wild.

It's all about them, we said.

There was something calming about effacing myself behind the presence of the girls in my charge, as if my own nature could be known by the bloom on their cheeks and the brilliance of their eyes. I was on vacation, emptied of worries. Despite my runny nose and

sore eyes, I began to feel much better. Catching my reflection in hotel mirrors, I imagined I looked youthful myself.

The next day, with Jane's suitcase full of gear, we shuttled between the hotel and the skating rink, where flocks of young girls in spangled dresses awaited their turn on the ice. Jane was poised and radiant in pink velvet, with tiny white roses in her French-braided blonde hair. She skated a solid program in the compulsories, executing a graceful, near-perfect two-foot spin at the end. As it happened, she took second place, so we celebrated with an extra-long brunch afterwards, and a leisurely check-out time. Leaving the Marriott in early afternoon, Jane with her medal around her neck was on cloud nine, and so was her best friend. For the time being, I, too, had forgotten my troubles—or at least pushed them temporarily out of mind. I was feeling what it was like to be an animal in springtime, surfeited with fresh air, sunshine, and the health of good living. Wordlessly alert, I fell into a contented reverie while the miles flew by under the tires of the car as we sped toward home.

It was another windy, gusty day. Grass fires had started to burn all over the state, sparked by burning trash, cigarettes, or misguided attempts to torch the tall, tangled dry bluestem in the drainage ditches by the roadsides. Somewhere west of Eldorado township we saw a fire burning out of control along one of the crushed-rock roads leading north into farming country. The southwest wind licked the flames into a long tongue of destruction that flickered rapidly through the grassy margin of the field, blackening the land in its wake. Soon the wall of flame would leap over the top of the no-till corn stubble trying to keep the soil from blowing away, heading for a woody fencerow that on this hot, windy day, might go up in a blaze.

The burning grass made me remember stories I'd heard of the early Iowa settlers' terror of fires that swept across thousands of acres, destroying everything in their wake. More apocryphal tales told of Indians and animals running before blazes ignited by lightning strikes. I turned on the radio and heard reports of a 4,000 acre fire burning in the southwest part of the state. Rocketing westward in the late afternoon through the windy haze that buffeted my little sedan, I almost passed the bird again without seeing it. Again, it was the long wing, with its outspread fan of feathers like a beckoning hand, that caught my dreaming attention.

"Girls, I'm pulling over!" I exclaimed impulsively.

I stomped the brake and steered onto the graveled shoulder. The car came to a rattling stop, and I immediately started backing up, looking backwards. "I'm stopping. Do you know why?"

"No," replied Jane apprehensively. "Are we being naughty?"

I was the kind of driver and also the kind of mother who brooked no nonsense from traveling children.

"No, no," I said distractedly. "Look behind us. It's a bird. A dead bird. I think it's an owl."

"Oh, no!" Jane screamed.

She twisted in her seat, unbuckling the belt so she could kneel and look out the rear window. Catching sight of the bird, she burst into loud, sobbing cries.

"No," moaned Betsy, turning.

I stopped the car and swung the door open. I was in a dangerous spot, right next to the

bridge abutment, where it was possible I might be hit by a careless driver veering through the narrow passage. Leaving the car running, I dodged back to the carcass of the bird. The creature lay on its side with its beak pointing north and its left wing flapping in the southwesterly wind.

I knelt down, my heart pumping hard in my chest.

I took in at a glance the matted, tousled feathers, the wing with its long, ragged feathers straining in the air. When I touched it, the wing fell down suddenly, brushing against my arm and hand like the fingers of a corpse. I stumbled back with a sharp sound, dimly aware of the two girls' faces peering through the back window of the car, my daughter's mouth distorted in a howl.

When I tried to pick the bird up, it jumped out of my hands, flopping over again on the roadside, as if trying to flap into the ditch. Its body was both warm and slippery in some strange way I couldn't define.

"Jesus Christ," I exclaimed. The bird lay motionless where it fell.

"Is it alive?" cried Jane.

By this time, she and Betsy had the back door open on the passenger's side, nearest the ditch.

I was instantly alert to their danger.

"No," I said. "Get back in the car."

I was trying to sound calmer than I felt. "Give me that grocery sack."

"Why, Mom? What are you doing?"

"Picking up the bird," I said. "Can you give me that bag?"

Leaning into the back seat, I started transferring cookies, apples, and small toys from the brown paper grocery sack to the back window.

"I'm taking it home. I'm going to put it in the trunk."

I ducked around to the driver's seat and turned off the car, taking the keys from the ignition. Maybe it was crazy to pick up road kill, but I felt as if I'd come upon the body of a very small person. I couldn't bear the thought of leaving it by the side of the road.

"Why, Mom? Why are you picking up the owl? Why?"

"Because," I said. "Because it just doesn't seem right to leave it here like worthless garbage. It's dead. We should take it home and give it a proper funeral."

"Oh, you're right," said Jane, sounding relieved through her tears. "Poor owl!"

Usually I carry a pair of old leather gloves in the car, but they'd been left back at home on the porch. Bare-handed, I scooped the limp bird up from the dirt. Its strong, hooked beak was half-open, its furry gray legs fully extended with long talons curled as if trying to hang to something that had slipped away. Tufted horns in feathery disarray over tightly-closed eyes X-ed out like a dead cartoon character's gave an eerie countenance of outrage to the owl's expressive face.

I had expected its body to be stiff, but instead it was limp. And I had expected it to smell bad, knowing that it had lain by the roadside for at least two days. Yet despite the warm weather, only the dusty smell of feathers came off the dead bird. With some difficulty, I worked the large wings and body into the paper bag and folded the top down once. Opening the trunk. I placed the bag in one corner, away from the suitcases, backpacks, and duffel bags.

My feelings were in a tumult as I hopped back into the driver's seat, revved the

engine, and gunned away from the bridge.

"Look out the windows, girls." I said. "Remember this spot! This is where some careless driver hit that owl. Looks like it was hunting. I'll bet it swooped down over the road and someone killed it."

"Yup," said Jane solemnly. "Some crazy driver. *You* wouldn't ever hit an owl, would you, Mom?"

"Not me," I said. "I wouldn't want to hit *that* owl."

I tried to imagine the huge bird hitting the windshield at sixty-five miles an hour. The idea made me shiver involuntarily.

"Me, either," said Jane solemnly, after a moment.

She and Betsy fell silent, thinking.

I looked out my window. To the south was Otter Creek Marsh again, its swampy pools glittering through the trees in the late-afternoon sun. Beyond were more woods, the Iowa River, and the Mesquakie settlement. To the north lay a few small farms nestled in the hilly land around the small towns of Tama and Toledo. It was owl country, with tall trees along the water's edge and good hunting in all the fields. Imagining the owl gliding over the road, I felt a surge of hot, helpless anger. The carnage on the highways was supposed to be outside our moral compass for some reason I could never quite remember, but what it came down to was that you were above reproach if you killed an owl with your car. Yet the birds were protected by the Federal government: you could not legally kill one, nor even own its feathers. I knew that.

But I picked the bird up anyway, because in that moment, nothing seemed more

shameful than to zip by, unconcerned.

"I wonder if we should give this bird to the Indians," I said impulsively, as we passed by the Mesquakie Casino. Only a few miles down the road, I'd begun to have second thoughts. I could just see myself getting pulled over by a state trooper with a contraband owl in the trunk.

"No," said Jane. "That's a bad idea. We found it. It's up to us to have the funeral."

"You're right," I said with a smile. Being Jane's mother made me feel good. We zoomed through the flats past the casino and up again into the smoky hills.

As it turned out, when we got home, Jane was strangely reluctant to even lay eyes on the dead owl, and truth to tell, so was I. I felt absurd and crazy with the body of a large dead creature in the trunk next to my daughter's suitcase full of spangled skating dresses. So we left the paper bag alone in the trunk for several hours after we'd removed everything else from the car. Then Jane and Betsy ran off to play.

I thought briefly of popping the bag with the bird in it into the deep freeze, but I found the idea strangely disturbing and quickly dismissed it. Finally, reluctantly, I lifted the folded-over paper bag out of the trunk and carried it onto the back porch, handling it with my old leather gloves. I took some trash out to the bin by the driveway. When I came back, our cats were on the back porch. Star, the most persistent, jumped up next to the paper bag and yowled plaintively. I hissed and shooed them away. It was obvious I was going to have do something with the owl. I took some old newspapers off a shelf and layered them on the floor.

I gently unfolded the top of the bag and shook it lightly until the owl slid out.

For a long moment, my gorge rose, and I felt suffocated in the warm, close air of the porch.

It was all nervous reaction. The bird didn't really smell. I took a cautious breath and knelt down close. When I went to smooth the feathers on its wing, a huge black insect leapt from the body, skittered across my hand and arm, fell to the floor, and disappeared under the newspapers.

"Jesus," I ejaculated, jumping back. Death beetle. Its unseen presence made my skin crawl.

Gingerly, I leaned over and rolled the bird onto its back.

Its face was cast in a perfect scowl, lightened somehow by the X-ed out eyes, as if the bird had died in amused, incredulous ire at its own absurd fate.

I spread out the two wings, and their span was more or less like my own, some five-and-a-half feet. The legs were stumps, covered with soft, mousy gray fur.

The long, curved talons were wickedly sharp.

I positioned the wing feathers carefully, noting the fine serration at their tips. Neither wing was broken. I touched the soft brown and white breast and neck feathers. No blood. The body that had looked so rumpled and dirty out on the highway was actually quite clean, glossy and slippery-soft to the touch. Now I understood why the bird had slid so easily from my bare hands when I tried to pick it up from the side of the road. Its feathers were as silky as my young daughter's hair.

"Wow," I said out loud. "Healthy."

I squatted there a moment in silent contemplation of the bird.

Then, sighing, I carefully folded the long wings and slipping one hand under its back, turned the owl over gently as a baby, supporting its breast in the palm of my other hand.

That was when I saw the hole in the back of its head, down low, near the neck, the shape and size of a .22 slug. I had seen that kind of hole before. I knew what it was. The bullet had struck the back of the bird's skull, and then glanced off the bone, probably stunning it before it fell down dead.

The bird's outraged expression made perfect sense.

Then I noticed the tail feathers had been completely ripped out.

I had heard that owl tail feathers were much coveted by collectors. Faux shaman used them to make smudge fans for cleansing rituals. Or people in online owl fan clubs traded them illegally on the Internet. Sickened and stunned, I sat back on my heels, letting the bird slip out of my hands to the floor.

Probably the Federal law against owning owl feathers had produced its own black market. It was the kind of entrepreneurial sideline like methamphetamine production or gambling that supplemented the livelihoods of certain barely-surviving Iowans. After all, where I'd found the bird was deep country, filled with poor people.

Shot in the back of the head!

Was it more or less degrading than getting hit by a car?

I realized the bird's body had probably been dumped by the bridge to make it look like road kill, the perfect cover for this kind of crime.

I let the owl lie in peace for another half hour, while I worked at digging a grave.

Knowing that the bird had been shot and that the tail feathers were missing made me even more anxious to get rid of it. Luckily, the ground out by my compost pit was thawed. I dithered around collecting things to put in the hole: a bit of red ribbon, a round stone from Vermont, a length of muslin in yellow and gold print, a handful of seeds. I wrapped the owl in the cloth, then lowered the body and knelt down to arrange its effects. With my head bowed, I whispered a few words, some of them hard-hearted and raging against the owl's killer.

Then I stood up.

"Fly free," I said.

I really meant it.

It wasn't religion, it was a heartfelt prayer for something bigger than myself.

I buried the owl deep and packed down the soil, then placed three large rocks over the grave: one white, one red, one black.

After burying the bird, I went into the house, washed my hands, and started to write:

*Dun color blended into the landscape.
Wing feathers waving for help.
Shot in the back of the head.*

Something hot twisted in my chest, and I stopped typing.

I got up and walked aimlessly in circles, moving from one room to another while my thoughts churned furiously.

How ridiculous to write about road kill!

Who cared about an owl?

Besides, no one would ever believe it had been shot in the back of the head! It was too

crazy.

I felt an overpowering urge to run outside and dig up the bird I had just buried, to look at the bullet wound again like a ghoulish amateur forensic pathologist disinterring a murder victim to ascertain the cause of death.

I left the writing open on my desktop, but I couldn't touch it for more than a week. Then I started researching great horned owls, but I had to stop when I realized one afternoon that I was sobbing uncontrollably over a 1938 Smithsonian bulletin on *Bubo virginianus*.

I was not going to cry over road kill.

Absurd as it seemed, I was going through some kind of grief process.

My mood lightened when, doing more research for the piece of writing I thought I was doing, I talked to Jonathan Buffalo, the Mesquakie tribal historian on the phone. I told him all about the dead owl, said I was writing about it.

I asked a few questions about owls in his culture, but he didn't really need much priming to get started.

"Listen," he said carefully, "owls in general are very wise birds. But we don't use owl feathers."

"I understand," I said. "I knew that from doing research, but I wanted to hear it from you."

"In the owl world, he's the wise one. You know, the owl world is different from yours and mine. I'm talking about the animal world."

"Yes," I said. "Go on. Do you mind if I write this down?"

"When the animals get together, even the birds, the owl is the voice of caution. That's

his nature. He signals reason, you know. Being careful. Thinking things through.”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever heard people say that we Indians don’t want to be around owls?”

“Yeah, I think I read that on the Internet.”

“Well, the non-Indian public interprets that as ‘owls are evil’—but that’s not true.

Owls are wise and all-knowing. They know the past and the future. We humans don’t want to know about the past and the future sometimes, so we’re afraid of the owl. The owl’s not an evil spirit. It’s not about good or evil.”

I murmured something incoherent.

I was busy writing, but the words were flowing over me like silky feathers, impossible to hold.

“We have a lot of owls on the settlement. Little screech owls. Hooting owls.”

“Great horned owls, like the one I found?”

“Yeah, we have those. We have lots of those. You know, we don’t want to run into one of those at night.” Jonathan Buffalo paused for dramatic effect, then said, “Like especially if you’re driving.”

I laughed.

I thought again about the owl hitting the windshield, then I remembered the missing tail feathers. I shivered.

“We respect the owl in its own way. The owl is like a wise old person. Sometimes the owl has a third way, a different perspective. Know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean,” I said.

I was thinking about this kind of sacred talk, this speech that spoke of many things without saying anything at all.

“In nature, the owl’s role is something like what you might call ‘wise communicator.’”

The inverted commas in the tone of Jonathan Buffalo’s voice made me realize that the tribal historian was giving me a partially ironic interpretation of something meaningful to him, which made me smile.

It’s like being in another country, talking to Indians. They often feel the need to belabor the obvious, as if we whites are exasperatingly naïve.

“I understand,” I said.

Over spring break, painting bucolic rural scenery on flat props for Jane’s upcoming patriotic-themed spring ice-skating show, I daydreamed about owls. I was afraid I might turn into one of those owl enthusiasts who collects ceramic owls and owl mugs, and wears owl T-shirts and owl ests everywhere. I’d be a crazy old lady, getting off the gambling bus at the Mesquakie Casino wearing a sweatshirt with a big owl embroidered on the front. Maybe I should find someone to talk about my owl encounter, before it changed my life completely.

Maybe the bird’s existence was degraded and meaningless, unless my own life was changed by it somehow.

One afternoon, I told one of the artists painting flats with me that I was working on an essay, and when she asked what it was about, I told her it was about road kill.

Then I told her it was about a great horned owl, a big one I’d picked up by the side of

the road.

The other painter looked at me blankly, as if expecting me to supply more information before deciding how to politely react. I turned and dabbed some more paint on my flat.

“So I’m writing about it,” I said lamely.

I still hadn’t reached any conclusions.

In the end, it was impossible to wrap everything up neatly. Sure, I was afraid of the past and the future. I probably needed some kind of message, too. Maybe I was supposed to be cautious, or maybe throw all caution to the winds. And maybe I was just plain crazy for having an illegal bird buried in my back yard. Life in Iowa could do that to you. But no matter whether I ever found my happy ending, I gained a small, secret piece of knowledge that still makes me feel hopeful: somewhere on the despoiled prairie of my homeland, down around the Indian settlement on the Iowa River, where the wind blows through burning grasses, another great horned owl is hunting tonight.